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## Death in Every Paragraph: Journalism & The Great Irish Famine

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DEATH  
IN EVERY  
PARAGRAPH

JOURNALISM &  
THE GREAT  
IRISH FAMINE

MICHAEL FOLEY

This essay is part of the interdisciplinary series *Famine Folios*, covering many aspects of the Great Hunger in Ireland from 1845-52.

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Figure 1 | Henry McManus, Reading "The Nation" [Detail]

## INTRODUCTION

The Great Irish Famine of 1845 to 1852 was a watershed, separating an eighteenth-century Ireland from modernity. This was also a period of great change for the press in Ireland, with changes in the taxation regime, in technology, and in the very idea of a free press. But if a newspaper editor or journalist in the early 1840s might have envisaged a stately progress towards the press becoming a “fourth estate” in Irish society, the Famine changed all that. Journalists, who had become increasingly aware of themselves as professionals, with particular rights and an ideological commitment to a free press, now found there was going to be nothing leisurely about the changes they were facing. Journalists and editors, faced with the disaster of the Famine years, were forced to find new ways of reporting that would define how the press worked for the next fifty years.

This, of course, also applied to every other aspect of Irish life; as Terry Eagleton describes, the acceleration of change was “surreal.” He argues that “[p]art of the horror of the Famine is its atavistic nature – the mind-shaking fact that an event with all the pre-modern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness” (14).

The Great Hunger, or *An Gorta Mór* as it is called in the Irish language, was the greatest calamity to hit Europe in the nineteenth century. Prior to the Famine, Ireland’s population was over eight million. During the Famine over one million people died and over one million emigrated, followed by a further two million who emigrated in the Famine’s aftermath. For the rest of the nineteenth century the population continued to fall, through lower birth rates and continuing emigration, so that by the end of the century the population was just over four million, a fifty-percent drop.

The impact of the Famine was shattering in both human and social terms, not just in Ireland but also in the United States, Britain, and other parts of the British Empire, due to the ensuing migrations. In Ireland it also had a devastating structural effect: the system of land ownership changed; the country began to urbanize; human



fertility declined; and because land inheritance patterns changed, marriages began to occur later in life. This essay is concerned not only with how the press reported the Famine, but also with how the Famine impacted on the press.

The literary critic Joep Leerssen describes the period between 1760 and 1845 as a turning point in European history, where backward- and forward-looking attitudes can be encountered “in extraordinary interaction, known nowadays among German historians under the name of *Sattelzeit*, or a ‘saddle period’ – a ridge between two different worlds, like the col in a mountain range, a watershed marking the transition from one territory into another” (12). Leerssen concedes that a *Sattelzeit* may not appear immediately obvious in Ireland between 1760 and 1845, and that the Famine, from 1845 onwards, is the great breaking point in Irish history. However, he does identify a number of trends in Irish public and intellectual life from about 1760 onwards which reflect the European pattern, in particular a major cultural transformation taking place between the traditional Gaelic and the urban, educated English-speaking classes. He also notes the transformation of literary and written culture due to the availability of cheap wood pulp paper and the invention of the rotary press. <sup>1</sup> This meant massive social penetration of all printed products, from cheap books to tracts and pamphlets and, of course, newspapers (12).<sup>2</sup>

The Irish press on the eve of the Famine had shown little vibrancy. Politics in Ireland were “tranquil,” to use Brian Inglis’s word (210), and so was newspaper life. Following the reduction in the “stamp duty” or newspaper tax from two pence to one penny in 1836, there was a small increase in newspaper activity. Ireland’s first sporting newspaper, *Paddy Kelly’s Life in Dublin*, was founded but had a short life. The *Dublin Monitor*, a radical paper, presumably hoped for healthy sales by being able to offer a cheap cover price when launched in 1839, but it failed after some initial success. Generally, the price reduction made possible by the reduction in the tax had little impact; newspapers were still too expensive for the vast majority of people. Nevertheless the practice of reading newspapers aloud meant the peasantry were able to keep abreast of important stories [Figure 2].

Inglis blames Daniel O’Connell, at least in part, for the poor showing of the liberal press. The liberal papers battled hard to support O’Connell, but struggled as he changed his mind on issues such as the repeal of the union that made Ireland and Britain one political unit, the retention of the forty-shilling freehold franchise, and the Poor Law – and then changed his mind again. Papers such as the *Freeman’s Journal* and the *Register*, torn between “their desire to retain their reputations for consistency and yet to support O’Connell, found great difficulty in collecting readers: and the avowedly O’Connellite newspapers never thrived” (223).<sup>3</sup> It would not be until 1842, with the foundation of the *Nation*, probably the most significant nationalist newspaper of the entire nineteenth century, that there was a development within the national or Dublin newspapers of any major significance.<sup>4</sup>

The changes that were forced upon Ireland by the Famine were eventually beneficial to the development of the press. Despite the declining population, the press developed and grew in the post-Famine period. Growing urbanization facilitated distribution, leading to an increase in the number of titles. The growth in the number of English speakers also helped a press that had evolved mainly in the English language.



Figure 2 | Daniel Macdonald, *Kerry Peasantry listening to the account of the Conviction of Dan O'Connell and the Traversers, at the State Trials in Dublin, Feb. 1844*

## PRESS HISTORY & AN IRISH PEASANT

If there is one story that epitomizes how the Famine changed journalism, it is that of a poor famine victim from County Clare, Bridget O'Donnel [Figure 3]. Her story appeared, not in an Irish newspaper, but in *The Illustrated London News (ILN)* (December 22, 1849). She is familiar to us from book covers and pamphlets, and to this day she is the starting point for many images commemorating the Famine. Artists such as Rowan Gillespie and John Behan have incorporated her image into their contemporary memorializing work, as seen in Ireland's Great Hunger Museum.<sup>5</sup>

She pervades Famine representation to this day, but Bridget O'Donnel also holds a place in press history for two reasons. First, we know who she is, and that is unusual. Newspapers and periodicals did not deal in human-interest stories, and did not tell their readers about the poor, except in the most general terms. The only way people like Bridget O'Donnel would normally have been named in a newspaper of the day was if she had appeared in court, was before a public hearing or tribunal, was a witness, or was the subject of an inquest. The poor featured anonymously, of course, as part of a mob or peasantry, but they were seldom identified by name. As historian John Kelly has put it, the poor Irish were an “undifferentiated mass” (124).

The second reason Mrs. O'Donnel is of interest is because of the words appeared in the same issue:

*“I lived,” she said, “on the lands of Gurranenuoba. My husband held four acres and a half of land, and three acres of bog land; our yearly rent was £7 4s.; we were put out last November; he owed some rent. We got thirty stone of oats from Mr. Marcus Keane, for seed. My husband gave some writing for it: he was paid for it. He paid ten shillings for reaping the corn. As soon as it was stacked, one ‘Blake’ on the farm, who was put to watch it, took it away to his own haggard and kept it there for a fortnight by Dan Sheedey’s orders. They then thrashed it in Frank Lellis’s barn. I was at this time lying in fever. Dan Sheedey and five or six men came to tumble my house; they wanted me to give possession. I said that I would not; I had fever, and was within two months of my down-lying (confinement); they*

*commenced knocking down the house, and had half of it knocked down when two neighbours, women, Nell Spellesley and Kate How, carried me out. I had the priest and doctor to attend me shortly after. Father Meehan anointed me. I was carried into a cabin, and lay there for eight days, when I had the creature (the child) born dead. I lay for three weeks after that. The whole of my family got the fever, and one boy thirteen years old died with want and with hunger while we were lying sick, Dan Sheedey and Blake took the corn into Kilrush, and sold it. I don't know what they got for it. I had not a bit for my children to eat when they took it from me."*

So we have here a story told by a woman of little means, cheated of her home and possessions and devastated by the death of her 13-year-old son, narrated in the sure anticipation of her own not-distant demise. The article attempts to engage the reader emotionally, and convey the scale, depth and gravity of the situation directly from the mouth of the victim to the readers of the newspaper. And this by means of an interview.



Figure 3 | "Bridget O'Donnell and Children" (ILN, December 22, 1849)



MISS KENNEDY DISTRIBUTING CLOTHING AT KILRUSH.

CONDITION OF IRELAND.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE NEW POOR-LAW.

(Continued from page 394.)

HAVING last week introduced this important subject to our readers, and given them some of the statistics of Kilrush, we shall henceforward allow our Correspondent to speak for himself:—

I assure you (he says) that the objects of which I send you Sketches are not sought after—I do not go out of my way to find them; and other travellers who have gone in the same direction, such as Lord Adair, the Earl of Surrey, and Mr. Horsman, will vouch, I am sure, for the accuracy of my delineations. The Sketch of Moven, to which I now call your attention, is that of another ruined village in the Union of Kilrush. It is a specimen of the dilapidation I behold all around. There is nothing but devastation, while the soil is of the finest description, capable of yielding as much as any land in the empire. Here, at Tullig, and other places, the ruthless destroyer, as if he delighted in seeing the monuments of his skill, has left the walls of the houses standing, while he has unroofed them and taken away all shelter from the people. They look like the tombs of departed race, rather than the recent abodes of a yet living people, and I felt actually relieved at seeing one or two half-clad spectres gliding about, as an evidence that I was not in the land of the dead. You may inquire, perhaps, and I

am sure your readers will wish to know, why it is that the people have of late been turned out of their houses in such great numbers, and their houses just at this time pulled down, and I will give you my explanation of this fact.

The public records, my own eyes, a piercing wall of woe throughout the land—all testify to the vast extent of the evictions at the present time. Sixteen thousand and odd persons unhoused in the Union of Kilrush before the month of June in the present year; seventy-one thousand one hundred and thirty holdings done away in Ireland, and nearly as many houses destroyed, in 1848; two hundred and fifty-four thousand holdings of more than one acre and less than five acres, put an end to between 1841 and 1848; six-tenths, in fact, of the lowest class of tenantry driven from their now roofless or annihilated cabins and houses, makes up the general description of that desolation of which Tullig and Moven are examples. The ruin is great and complete. The blow that affected it was irresistible. It came in the guise of charity and benevolence; it assumed the character of the last and best friend of the peasantry, and it has struck them to the heart. They are prostrate and helpless. The once frolicsome people—even the sassy beggars—have disappeared, and given place to wan and haggard objects, who are so resigned to their doom, that they no longer expect relief. One beholds only shrunken frames scarcely covered with flesh—crawling skeletons, who appear to have risen from their graves, and are ready to return frightened to that abode. They have little other covering than that nature has bestowed on the human body—a poor protection against inclement weather; and, now that the only hand from which they expected help is turned against them, even hope is departed, and they are filled with despair. Than the present Earl of Carleton there is not a more humane nor a kinder-hearted nobleman in the kingdom; he is of high honour and unsullied reputation; yet the Poor-law he was mainly the means of establishing for Ireland, with the best intentions, has been one of the

chief causes of the people being at this time turned out of their homes, and forced to burrow in holes, and share, till they are discovered, the ditches and the bogs with others and snakes.



BRIDGET O'DONNELL AND CHILDREN.

The instant the Poor-law was passed, and property was made responsible for poverty, the whole of the landowners, who had before been careless about the people, and often allowed them to plant themselves on untenanted spots, or divide their tenancies—delighted to get the promise of a little additional rent—immediately became deeply interested in preventing that, and in keeping down the number of the people. Before they had rates to pay, they cared nothing for them; but the law and their self-interest made them care, and made them extirpaters. Nothing less than some general desire like that of cupidity falling in with an enactment, and justified by a theory—nothing less than a passion which works silently in all, and safely under the sanction of a law—could have effected such wide-spread destruction. Even humanity was enlisted by the Poor-law on the side of extirpation. As long as there was no legal provision for the poor, a landlord had some repugnance to drive them from every shelter; but the instant the law took them under its protection, and forced the landowner to pay a rate to provide for them, repugnance ceased; they had a legal home, however inefficient, to go to; and eviction began. Even the growth of toleration seems to have worked to the same end. Till the Catholics were emancipated, they were all—rich and poor, priests and peasants—united by a common bond; and Protestant landlords' beginning evictions on a great scale, would have roused against them the whole Catholic nation. It would have been taken up as a religious question, as well as a question of the poor; prior to 1829. Subsequent to that time—with a Whig Administration, with all offices open to Catholics—no religious feelings could mingle with the matter; eviction became a pure question of interest; and while the priests look now, perhaps, as much to the Government as to their flocks for support, Catholic landlords are not behind Protestant landlords in clearing their estates. English notions and English habits, without any reference to the causes of English



SCALPERS OF THE BOWERS, AT DUNMORE.

Figure 4 | Pages from The Illustrated London News (December 22, 1849)



VILLAGE OF MOVKEN.

creasiness—which are not to be found in a Poor-law and farms of a particular size—impressed law-makers and the landlords of Ireland with a strong desire to enlarge and consolidate farms, and clear them of the squatters and sub-tenants, who had formerly been permitted, if not encouraged. With a Poor-law, that desire could be safely acted on, and so it supplies a temptation and the means to carry eviction extensively into effect.

by the chilliness and dreariness of a November evening, and by the wet and mire in which the naked feet of the crowd were immersed. On Captain Kennedy being appointed to the Union, his daughter was much affected by the misery of the poor children she saw; and so completely did it occupy her thoughts, that, with the consent of her parents, she gave up her time and her own little means to relieve them. She gave away her own clothes—she was allowed to bestow part of her mother's—and she then purchased coarse materials, and made up clothing for children of her own age; she was encouraged by her father and some philanthropic strangers, from whom she received sums of money, and whose example will no doubt be followed by those who possess property in the neighbourhood; and she devoted herself with all the energy and perseverance of a mature and staid matron to the holy office she has undertaken. The Sketch will, I hope, immortalize the beneficent child, who is filling the place of a saint, and performing the duties of a patriot.

On all sides I hear praises of the amiable child and her excellent father, and this is not without a moral for the landlords. The public officers who are appointed to administer and control the relief of the poor, have it in their power to do much for the people. Mere kindness of manner, though they render no substantial assistance, endears them to the suffering crowd. Captain Kennedy is of one kind, charitable, and judicious. He is at the head of the Union. He fills for the people the most important office in the district. He is the great man of the place. It must be so in other districts. The funds are contributed by the landowners, but they are distributed by public officers. Thus the Poor-law, which disposes of the landowners' property, also deprives them of the pleasure and the burden of distributing it themselves. A public officer is made, in fact, to administer their estates, and he stands between them and their compulsory bounties, securing the respect and confidence which they might and ought to have. The more the subject is examined, the more, I have no doubt,



SEARCHING FOR POTATOES IN A STUBBLE FIELD.

The evictions were numerous before the potato rot. It was not that great calamity, therefore, that superinduced them, or was the chief cause of the present desolation. The potato harvest and harvests of every kind have been lost many times before 1846, without reducing the people to their present misery. But that calamity threw the people at the mercy of the Government, and the Government used its power directly and indirectly, in accordance with the theory, to clear the land. Out-door relief was established in that season of distress, and relief altogether was coupled with the resignation of the land. The poor were required to give up their heritages, small though it were, for less than a mere of pottage. A law was passed, the 11 and 12 Vic. c. 47, entitled, "An Act for the Protection and Relief of the Destitute Poor Evicted from their Dwellings," which provided a means of evicting them, subjecting the landlords to the necessity of giving notice to Poor-law guardians, and to the share of a common burden. Under such stimuli and such auspices, the clearing process has gone on in an accelerated ratio, and Ireland is now dotted with ruined villages, and filled with a starving population, besieging the doors of crowded workhouses, and creeping into the halls and chambers of the deserted mansions of the nobility and gentry. A gentleman's mansion turned into a poor-house, is a fit emblem of the decay that a mistaken policy has brought on all classes. The system intended to relieve the poor, by making the landlords responsible for their welfare, has at once made it the interest, and therefore the duty, of the landlords to get rid of them. Extirpation is accordingly going forward at a rapid rate; and the evidence of that is now placed before the eyes and the understanding of the readers of the ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

I will give you, by-and-by, some notices of driving for rent, of landowners impoverished by rates, and of bankrupt unions; but at present I must draw attention to some of the other sketches I send. The *Scap of Brian Connor* (here represented) has been already described; it is another illustration of the worse than pig-sty habitations of those who did live in the now roofless cottages. Another Sketch follows of Miss Kennedy, which shows that, amidst the world of wretchedness, all is not misery and guilt. Indeed, it is a part of our nature that the sufferings of some should be the occasion for the exercises of virtue in others. Miss Kennedy (about seven years old) is the daughter of Captain Kennedy, the Poor-law Inspector of the Kilmash Union. She is represented as engaged in her daily occupation of distributing clothing to the wretched children brought around her by their more wretched parents. In the front of the group I noticed one woman crouching like a monkey, and drawing around her the only rag she had left to conceal her nudity. A big tear was rolling down her cheek, with gratitude for the gifts the innocent child was distributing. The effect was heightened



SCAP OF BRIAN CONNOR, NEAR KILMASH UNION-HOUSE.

Press history orthodoxy has it that the interview did not become a journalistic device until much later in the century. In the United States – the home of the interview – the first one is attributed to the founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley [Figure 5], when he interviewed Brigham Young, then the president of the Mormon Church and the first governor of Utah Territory, in Salt Lake City in August 1859 (Silvester 3).<sup>6</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the origin of the word “interview” as a journalistic term even later, to 1869, and claims that it was confined to American journalism. It was not until the journalist W.T. Stead popularized the interview in the 1880s that it became commonplace in the British press. Yet here we have an interview with an Irish Famine victim in 1849, in an English publication, supposedly thirty years before the first interviews were published in Britain.

So what is the effect of the Mrs. O’Donnell interview in the context of the Famine? Her story was intended to concretize the event by communicating information directly from the person experiencing it, and to effect an emotional connection with readers. Reports of conditions in Ireland were so appalling as to defy credulity. Graphic reports of death and disease in Ireland exceeded anything anyone in England

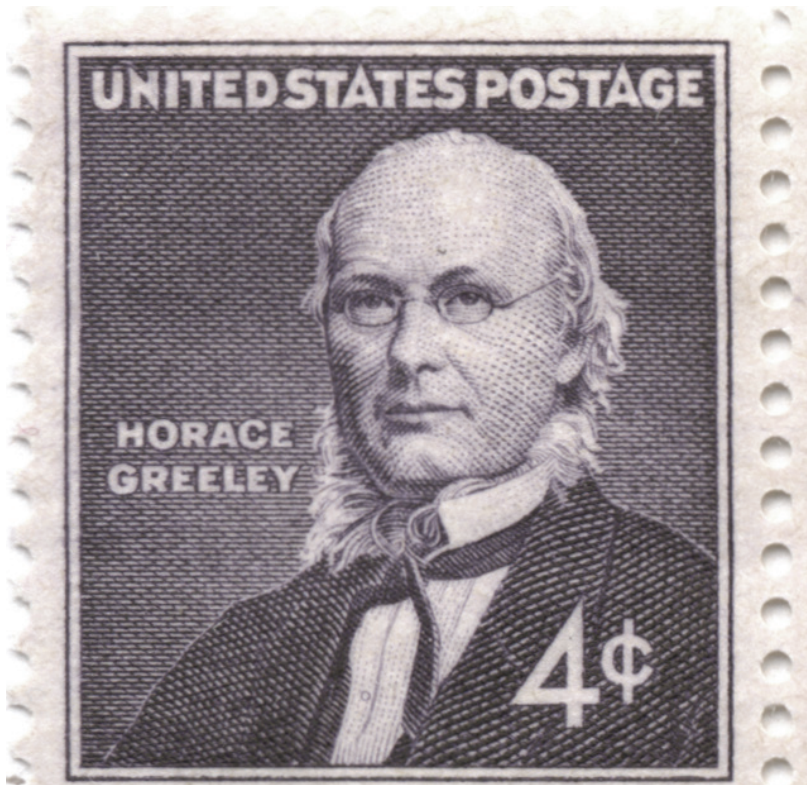


Figure 5 | US postage stamp of Horace Greeley (founder of the *New York Tribune*)

or elsewhere had ever heard or read of. Journalists felt it necessary to devise new means of authentication, of persuading readers of the veracity of their stories. The use of the image, of course, required an explanation. Despite appearances, images do not yield a single, fixed interpretation.

The journalistic evidence suggests that the illustration of Bridget O'Donnel is of a real person, and that the words attributed to her were her words. Each element of the story was included to authenticate the whole. To back up its claim to factuality the *ILN* claimed it represented “affairs without bias” and that it provided not only a record of contemporary events but also a treasure trove for future generations (qtd. in Schwartz 165). But what was unprecedented about Mrs. O'Donnel was not only that she was named, but that this poor, dispossessed Irish Famine victim was projected onto the international news stage, and her own words were used to convince the world of the massive social and political injustice endured by the people of Ireland.

There is little to suggest that the artist – probably James Mahony, who we assume also wrote the words – was aware of the significance of what he was doing. Although Bridget O'Donnel became, and remained, emblematic of the Famine, the illustration itself is small and her words actually appear on another page. The other illustration that appears on the same page, of a Miss Kennedy giving out clothes to the poor children of the area, probably had greater impact at the time because of the uplifting nature of a story about a little girl wanting to help other children [Figure 4].



## EVANGELICALISM & HUMANISM

An important philosophical development in the nineteenth century was what the cultural historian James Vernon calls “humanitarianism,” or what perhaps more appropriately in this context could be called a sense of empathy.

In the early nineteenth century, when the theories of Thomas Malthus held sway, hunger was seen as a God-given way of enforcing the moral order, forcing the poor to work and preventing overpopulation. Any attempt to alleviate the suffering of the hungry was seen as making them more, not less dependent. The logic of Malthus, alongside the Protestant evangelical movement that spread across England just as he published his influential *Essay on Population*, meant a strong religious and intellectual emphasis on the poor as sinfully responsible for their own hunger, and the necessity of atonement through hard work. But for Malthus, not even this atonement can obviate the necessity of famine:

*Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world (44).*

By the 1840s attitudinal changes were evident. The London *Times* led a charge against the Poor Law of 1834, by highlighting the innocent nature of the people in the poor house and the fact that they were not responsible for their plight. There were still strong ideological commitments to the market and *laissez-faire* economics. In 1847 the *Times* proclaimed that “something like harshness [was] the greatest humanity,” and the *Economist* commented on pleas for public assistance with: “it is not man’s business to provide for another” (qtd. in Ó Gráda 6). However, the

idea of a common humanity had become an increasingly popular concept since the Enlightenment, culminating in the French Revolution and the formulation of the Rights of Man. The ideas of philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant, who maintained that human beings were owed respect simply because they were human and capable of reason, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who emphasized the fundamental goodness of man, gained prominence in social and political discourse at the expense of the view of man as sinner.

Within new capitalist economies, the peasantry were becoming workers. While still considered as a collective, they were now also individual consumers. The more progressive publications were constantly trying to find new ways of reflecting the individual in their stories. As Benedict Anderson argues, it was print capitalism “which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways” (36). In this regard, James Vernon suggests: “The hungry became figures of humanitarian concern only when novel forms of news reporting connected people emotionally with the suffering of the hungry and refuted the Malthusian model of causation. In this sense hunger first became news during the 1840s” (17).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were tensions within the British governing elite between protectionism and free trade, and between the traditional landlord class and the interests of a new capitalist class. The Famine occurs during the height of this debate and journalists, among others, seek ways of including the hungry in its coverage. As Vernon notes:

*In the wake of the new Poor Law and the Irish Famine, journalists and social innovators developed new techniques to represent the innocent suffering of the hungry. By giving it a human face, they ensured that hunger, both home and abroad, became a focus of humanitarian concern before the Great War (273).*

In the 1840s, however, the journalists’ armory was a limited one. Reporting consisted mainly of the speeches of judges and lawyers in court, goings-on in parliament, the words of men of respect and standing speaking at public meetings, or the activities of various bodies and local authorities. Often this was done and endorsed with evident editorial bias. Journalists were able to report on politics, but still found it difficult to report on society, a separate entity where ordinary people lived out their lives.

Charles Dickens is an interesting example of a journalist who wanted to write about social issues, but found that journalism as it existed in the nineteenth century did not offer a way of doing so. He worked as a journalist before becoming a novelist, and combined journalism and fiction writing right up to his death. The classic image of the inhumanity of the workhouse appeared in fiction: *Oliver Twist* asking for more. However, even here, there was a strong link to journalism. The novel *Oliver*

*Twist*, like many of Dickens's best-known works, was first published in serial form in journalistic publications, between 1837 and 1839. Furthermore, the journalist in Dickens made sure the factual elements in the novel were correct, such as the list of food items Oliver might have eaten in the workhouse.



Figure 6 | Unkles and Klasen, *Portrait of Daniel O'Connell*

## PRESS DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 1840s

Not only did the scale of the horror of the Famine impel journalists to seek radical new ways of reporting what seemed beyond the powers of communication but, in the 1840s, newspapers and periodicals were themselves on the cusp of great change requiring journalists to look for new ways to tell stories. Arguments about a free press were increasingly insistent. In Ireland, while the debate was influenced by that taking place in England, it was a decidedly Irish issue that led to discussion among journalists about their own responsibility to campaign for a free press: Daniel O’Connell and his attempt to bully the liberal press into unquestioning support of him and the nascent Repeal movement [Figure 6].

O’Connell attacked the Irish press for not adequately supporting him and his decision to revive the campaign for repeal of the Act of Union in 1839, threatening to “chastise” the press if he did not get full support.<sup>7</sup> Although the journalists walked out and refused to cover his speech – in itself a remarkable exercise in group solidarity – most newspaper proprietors soon conformed for fear of the wrath of such a powerful figure. Michael Staunton of the *Morning Register* held out longest. Staunton, a major figure in Dublin journalism, argued that, in the long run, an independent press would be of more value to O’Connell’s cause than servile newspapers. Inglis argues:

*That so great a change came over the Irish press in the twenty-odd years following Peel’s departure from Ireland, must be credited largely to Staunton’s realisation that the freedom of the press could be maintained only while the newspaper retains its liberty to criticise the policies, not only of its antagonists, but also of the interests it wishes to support (227).*

However, O’Connell was by no means the only person seeking to control the press. The British ruling elite used harassment, secret subsidies, and libel in their own interests. Moreover, the British authorities had relied on newspaper duty and taxes as a way of curbing the radical press in England, and the same taxes were also imposed in Ireland. Taxes were designed to restrict readership of newspapers to the middle classes by making them expensive, and also to ensure that ownership was in the hands of the propertied class. It was viewed as “potentially dangerous to the

# THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS



No. 1.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING SATURDAY, MAY 14, 1842.

[SIXPENCE.]

### OUR ADDRESS.

In presenting the first number of the *ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS* to the British Public, we would fain make a graceful entree into the wide and grand arena, which will henceforth contain so many actors for our benefit, and so many spectators of our career. In plain language, we do not produce this illustrated newspaper without some vanity, much ambition, and a fond belief that we shall be pardoned the presumption of the first quality by realising the aspirations of the last. For the past ten years we have watched with admiration and enthusiasm the progress of illustrative art, and the vast revolution which it has wrought in the world of publication, through all the length and breadth of this mighty empire. To the wonderful march of periodical literature it has given an impetus and rapidity almost equal with the gigantic power of steam. It has converted blocks into wisdom, and given wings and spirit to ponderous and senseless wood. It has in its turn adorned, gilded, reflected, and interpreted nearly every form of thought. It has given to fancy a new dwelling-place—to imagination a more permanent throne. It has set up fresh landmarks of poetry, given sterner pungency to satire, and mapped out the geography of mind with clearer boundaries and more distinct and familiar intelligence than it ever bore alone. Art—now fostered, and redundant in the peculiar and facile department of wood engraving—has, in fact, become the bride of literature; genius has taken her as its handmaid; and popularity has crowned her with laurels that only seem to grow the greener the longer they are worn.

And there is now no staying the advance of this art into all the departments of our social system. It began in a few isolated volumes—stretched itself next over fields of natural history and science—penetrated the arcane of our own general literature—and made companionship with our household books. At one plunge it was in the depth of the stream of poetry—working with its every current—partaking of the glow, and adding to the sparkles of the glorious waters—and so refreshing the very soul of genius, that even Shakspeare came to us clothed with a new beauty, while other kindred poets of our language seemed as if we were to have put on festive garments to crown the marriage of their muses to the arts. Then it walked abroad among the people, went into the poorer cottages, and visited the humblest homes in cheap guises, and perhaps, in roughish forms; but still with the illustrative and the instructive principle strongly worked upon, and admirably developed for the general improvement of the human race. Lastly, it took the merry aspect of fun, frolic, satire, and badinage; and the school of *Charivari* began to blend itself with the graver pabulum of *Penny Cyclopaedias* and *Saturday Magazines*.

And now, when we find the art accepted in all its elements, and welcomed by every branch of reading into which it has diverged; now, when we see the spirit of the times everywhere associating with it, and heralding or recording its success; we do hold it as of somewhat triumphant omen, that we are, by the publication of this very newspaper, launching the grand vessel of illustration into a channel the broadest and the widest that it has ever dared to stem. We bound at once over the billows of new ocean—we sail into the very heart and focus of public life—we take the world of newspapers by storm, and flout a banner on which the words "ILLUSTRATED NEWS" become symbols of a freer purpose, and a more enlarged design, than was ever measured in that hemisphere till now.

The public will have henceforth under their glance, and within their grasp, the very form and presence of events as they transpire, in all their substantial reality, and with evidence visible as well as circumstantial. And whatever the broad and palpable delineations of wood engraving can be taught to achieve, will now be brought to bear upon every subject which attracts the attention of mankind, with a spirit in unison with the character of such subject, whether it be serious or satirical, trivial or of purpose grave.

And, reader, let us open something of the detail of this great intention to your view. Begin, *par exemple*, with the highest region of newspaper literature—The Political. Why, what a field! If we are strong in the creed that we adopt—if we are honest, as we pledge ourselves to be, in the purpose that we maintain—how may we wield muscle, bone, and sinew to the tone taken and the cause espoused, by bringing to bear upon our opinions, a whole battery of vigorous illustration. What "H B" does amid the vacillations of

parties, without any prominent opinions of his own, we can do with double regularity and consistency, and therefore with more valuable effect. Moreover, regard the homely illustration which nearly every public measure will afford: your Poor-laws—your Corn-laws—your Factory-bills—your Income-taxes! Look at the field of public portraiture presented in your Houses of Legislature alone, and interesting to every constituency in the land. Open your police-offices, your courts of law, your criminal tribunals—all the pith and marrow of the administration of justice—you can have it broadly before you, with points of force, of ridicule, of character, or of crime; and if the pen be ever led into fallacious argument, the pencil must at least be circular with the spirit of truth.

In the world of diplomacy, in the architecture of foreign policy, we can give you every trick of the great Babel that other empires are seeking to level or to raise. In these "peaces" then shall its arts, implements, and manufactures be spread upon our page. The literature—the customs—the dress—may, the institutions and localities of other lands, shall be brought home to you with spirit, with fidelity, and, we hope, with discretion and taste. Is there war? then shall its seat and actions be laid naked before the eye. No estafette—no telegraph—no steam-winged vessel—no overland mail, shall bring intelligence to our shores that shall not be sifted with industry, and illustrated with skill in the columns of this journal; and whether the cowardice of China or the treachery of Afghanistan be the theme of your abhorrence or resentment, you shall at least have as much historical detail of both as, while it gratifies general curiosity, shall minister to the natural anxieties at home of those who have friends and relations amid the scenes delineated and the events described.

Take another fruitful branch of illustration, the pleasures of the people—their theatres, their concerts, their gait, their races, and their fairs! Again, the pleasures of the aristocracy—their court festivals, their *balls masques*, their levees, their drawing-rooms—the completion of their grandeur and the circumstance of all their pomp!

In literature, a truly beautiful arena will be entered upon; for we shall not only, in most instances, have the opportunity of illustrating our own reviews, but of borrowing selections from the illustrations of the numerous works which the press is daily pouring forth, so elaborately embellished with woodcuts in the highest style of art.

In the field of fine arts—but let the future speak, and let us clip premises in the wing. We have perhaps said enough, without condescending to the littleness of too much detail, to mark the general outline of our design; and we trust to the kindness and intelligence of our readers to imagine for us a great deal more than we have been able to crowd into the compass of an introductory leader. Moreover, we would strongly premise an expression of gratitude for all suggestions that may hereafter reach us, and assure our volunteers of those, that wherever there seems a possibility of acting upon them creditably, that course shall be taken with promptitude, vigour, and effect.

Here we make our bow, determined to pursue our great experiment with boldness; to associate its principle with a purity of tone that may secure and hold fast for our journal the fearless patronage of families; to seek in all things to uphold the great cause of public morality; to keep continually before the eye of the world a living and moving panorama of all its actions and influences; and to withhold from society no point that its literature can furnish or its art adorn, so long as the genius of that literature, and the spirit of that art, can be brought within the reach and compass of the Editors of the *ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS*!

### DESTRUCTION OF THE CITY OF HAMBURG BY FIRE.

By the arrival of the General Steam Navigation Company's boat *Saledonia*, of the *Tower*, on Tuesday evening, news has been brought of an immense conflagration which took place on Thursday morning, the 5th instant, at one o'clock, in that city. The district in which the fire broke out consists entirely of wood tenements, chiefly of five and six stories high, and covering an area of ground of about thirty to forty acres. The whole of the buildings on this large space have been totally consumed to the number of more than 1000. The fire was by some thought to have originated in the street known by the name of the *Stein Twitz*, in the warehouse of a Jew, named *Cohen*, a cigar manufacturer, and who, upon good grounds, has been taken up on suspicion as the incendiary. The wind at the time blew a stout north-wester, causing the flames rapidly to spread; and proceeding in the direction of *Hodding's market*, and from thence to *Deuch street*, entirely consuming the whole of the following streets, among which is the *Heppen-market*, and *St. Nicholas Church*, a fine stone fabric, and the handsomest in *Hamburg*. *Gratz Twitz*, *Cresson* (back and end), *Grosser Borsch*, *Mulden Brucke*, *Alte Biers*, *Bohlen Strasse*, *Moske-*



View of the Conflagration of the City of Hamburg.

Figure 7 | The Illustrated London News (front page of first issue) (May 14, 1842)

social order to allow the lower orders to read newspapers at all.” Consequently stamp duty increased by 266 per cent between 1789 and 1815 (Curran and Seaton 11).

In England there was considerable fear of the new working class – less deferential than their peasant fathers and grandfathers – who organized unions and combinations. The establishment feared those who read the popular radical and untaxed press, some of which had strong Irish links, in particular Feargus O’Connor’s *Northern Star*. However, over time those arguing against the heavy taxes prevailed and slowly changes were made, and those who held the view that a cheaper, less taxed and more affordable press (so long as it was of the right sort) would be “improving” eventually won out, and a cheaper popular and commercial press saw off the illegal radical press.

The argument for a freer press, less taxed and free of government subsidy and support, took place within the context of debates about free trade and the repeal of the Corn Laws that so impacted on the Irish Famine.<sup>8</sup> The driving force behind the tax reduction campaign was a group of liberal industrialist MPs who perceived a free press as a means of promoting the principles of free trade and competitive capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

The new lower tax regime led to the establishment in England of many new newspapers and periodicals, such as the *News of the World*, the *Daily News* and the *Economist*. And, of course, the *ILN* was established in 1842, as well as other pictorial newspapers.<sup>10</sup> The *ILN* was the first illustrated news journal, and this format was very quickly copied across Europe and the United States [Figure 7]. The long- to medium-term significance of the development of the illustrated newspapers was to transform illustrations into credible, factual, news-reporting tools, where they had previously been used simply for caricatures, copies of works of art, or to represent sensational events like public hangings. It was also the start of the newspaper being both a literary and visual medium.

If the tax reductions were a catalyst for change and expansion in increasingly urbanized England, Ireland would have to wait until well after the Famine had abated before it would see similar growth in newspaper titles. The reduction of the tax from four pence to one penny in England had a major impact in that country, but the tax had only ever been two pence in Ireland, a concession that recognized the smaller population and consequent lower circulation figures. But while Irish newspaper proprietors continued to argue for an even greater reduction, or even total abolition, any decrease was welcome. The newspaper stamp duty, as it was called after the stamp on each page indicating the tax had been paid, was finally abolished in 1855. However, Irish newspapers would continue to be harassed, closed down, and have their presses smashed by the authorities, while journalists and editors were imprisoned and deported throughout the nineteenth century.

As well as the impetus created by legal and financial changes – the reduction of stamp duty, the tax on advertising, and other financial burdens – there were other changes taking place in the wider culture. Technological development, for example, made it possible to place both an illustration and text on the same page, thereby enlivening the story and heightening the sense of veracity.

Other significant changes were taking place within the occupation of journalism itself. The first paid reporters in Ireland were hired only in 1824, in time to cover the campaign for Catholic Emancipation (Nowlan 15). By the mid-1830s this new breed of reporters were beginning to see themselves as a recognizable group of professionals, and were confident enough of their position and responsibilities to actually found a society for editors and reporters – the poet James Clarence Mangan, who contributed to the *University Magazine*, was invited to be a member, an early indication of Irish journalists’ literary pretensions.

The Press Association was formally established at a meeting of Dublin editors, sub-editors and reporters in May 1838, following a motion from the future editor of the *Nation*, Charles Gavan Duffy, then a reporter with the *Morning Register* [Figure 8]. Although it did not last long, Inglis suggests that the fact that it was formed at all “was an indication of the reporters’ growing realisation of their responsibilities; and it came in time to give the press confidence in one of its periodic contests with authority over the limits of the public’s right to read accounts of administrative deliberations of public boards” (219). Journalists wanted to assert their right to report on such events as meetings of Poor Law guardians – which provided a journalistic record now crucial to our understanding of how the Famine was mismanaged – along with other official bodies. They were sophisticated enough in their understanding of press freedom to protest when excluded from what might have been considered politically damaging events, and to draw attention to that in their newspapers. Soon readers became accustomed to reading accounts of official and semi-official bodies.

Writing on the press in Ireland during the Famine years has tended to emphasize the role of newspapers in the politics of the period, or to treat newspapers as historical sources.<sup>11</sup> The first perspective gives too much emphasis to the role of those newspapers associated with particular political viewpoints, while the second sees newspapers as simply passive reporters of events. In reality the role of the press is more complex: it contributes to developments as well as reporting on them. Its activities have an influence on policy, and are involved in creating what the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas has called the “public sphere,” or civil society (51). One might consider the poor Irishman reading a newspaper in one of the Repeal reading rooms, established around the country, or listening to someone reading aloud from a newspaper outside a chapel – a tangible example of a public sphere, filling perhaps the same role as the coffee houses that in an earlier period helped create a public that was held together by the press.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 8 | Beatrice M. Franklin, *Portrait of Charles Gavan Duffy* (editor of the *Nation*)





Henry McManus's painting *Reading "The Nation"* serves to indicate the place and importance of the newspaper in Irish life [Figures 1 and 9]. As James Carey said in his influential essay, "The Problem of Journalism History": "The central idea in journalism is the 'idea of a report' and the changing notion of what has been taken to be an adequate report of the world" (90). In other words, the work of journalists has a context, and how they do their work, or write reports, changes over time.

While most newspapers declared their political and/or religious allegiance in their prospectuses, and in press directories aimed at advertisers, a distinction can be drawn between those newspapers that were overtly political – the *Nation*, for instance – and papers such as Michael Staunton's *Morning Chronicle*. Staunton, as stated earlier, objected to being *viewed* as giving unquestioning support to O'Connell, despite being pro-Repeal, as he wanted to maintain a degree of independence. Likewise the journalists who demanded to be allowed to report on local authority meetings, or the meetings of Poor Law guardians, believed they had an independent role, regardless of whom they might support editorially.

Any distinction between the overtly political press, such as the *Nation*, the *United Irishman* or the *Irish Felon* and what might be classed as the mainstream or commercial press, was not always clear in Ireland. While many, but not all, of the political or advanced nationalist publications had a short lifespan (the *Nation*, founded in 1842, was the obvious exception, lasting, with but a few interruptions, until 1900), and were associated with a particular political grouping or party, the more mainstream press was developing professional practices and skills. The use of shorthand was becoming a necessity for being hired as a journalist. As the century progressed, the idea of a professional journalist (who might also be politically aligned) became commonplace – so much so that a nationalist journalist might seek and obtain work on a unionist newspaper, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Journalism also became a profession that increasingly catered for middle-class Catholic men seeking a profession that did not require an oath of loyalty to the Crown. While most newspapers editorially supported the nationalist or unionist cause – either by supporting the repeal of the Act of Union or favoring conservatism – usually they were not officially attached to a political cause or grouping, or viewed as party newspapers.

Most scholarly research of the press in the 1840s has looked at the press as an extension of the political movements of the time.<sup>14</sup> Two examples of what have become standard works in the often neglected area of press history are Inglis's 1954 study of press freedom in Ireland – which only goes only up to 1841 – and Legg's 1999 work on newspapers and nationalism – which does not start until 1850, leaving most of the Famine period under-researched. Moreover, much of the academic work on press history has been descriptive, often failing to put newspaper history within a theoretical framework. Historians who have drawn on newspapers as source material have often taken accounts of events at face value, with little understanding of media analysis.

Part of the problem is undoubtedly the number of newspapers. Statistics for newspapers at this period are notoriously unreliable, but it appears there were ninety-one newspapers in Ireland (see Mitchel, *passim*). For England, accurate figures are even more unreliable because the hugely popular untaxed and radical press often failed to appear in any official register. Suffice to say that the *Newspaper Press Directory* lists 126 newspapers just for London. The *Times* alone gave the Famine enormous coverage. An analysis of local, let alone national and international reportage would be enormously difficult. Nevertheless, it is surprising that focused analysis that is thematized, periodized or regionalized has not been attempted. This has resulted in a serious lacuna, from the point of view of both newspaper history and Famine history.



Figure 9 | Henry McManus, Reading "The Nation"

## COUNTY CORK: A CASE STUDY

Journalists could hardly know how long the Famine would last, or how bad it would be, but they saw that it was demonstrably a major event in journalism, both English and Irish. Journalists and artists were sent to the ravaged areas, as to a war zone, to report back on conditions that seemed impossible in a part of the world's most powerful country (Fegan 5). Due to their efforts, and not simply the conditions themselves, famine-stricken towns like Skibbereen and Schull were publicized, and received relief [Figure 10]. Those towns that missed out on the media frenzy had to rely on often non-existent local public support.

In time, and in response to the Famine, we start to see the beginnings of practices that will come to define how journalists cover disasters – not just Irish journalists, but also British, American, and others. The coverage of events in West Cork, for instance, shows an early development of news values, and of what later became known as pack journalism, with a number of journalists being drawn to the same story. It also gave rise to the development of news as a particular narrative form and, of course, the recording of victims' words in what later, as we have seen, would be called the interview. The humanitarian narrative emerged out of the coverage of coroners' inquests, where life histories were detailed and where events that led to death by hunger were recorded. Those reports challenged the Malthusian model by suggesting the subjects of the inquests were innocent victims of forces beyond their control (Vernon 19).

This essay then takes as a case study the newspapers of Cork in the crucial year of 1847. Cork is interesting in that it had three newspapers and it was one of the worst-affected counties. The *Cork Constitution* was established in 1822 and listed in the *Newspaper Press Directory* as “conservative” and attached to “Church of Ireland principles.” The *Cork Examiner* was founded in 1841 by John Francis Maguire, a Repeal MP, and was liberal, favoring the repeal of the Act of Union [Figure 11]. The *Cork Southern Reporter*, founded in 1807, was also liberal and also favored repeal.



Figure 10 | “Old Chapel Lane, Skibbereen” (LLN, February 13, 1847)

In 1847, the *Cork Southern Reporter* opened the year with a report from a regular correspondent, Dr. Daniel Donovan, in his “Diary of a Dispensary Doctor.” Dr. Donovan was the medical officer at the Skibbereen Dispensary and Union Workhouse. The *Cork Examiner* also had a regular contributor from West Cork, Jeremiah O’Callaghan, whose very regular dispatches from the area were often picked up and carried by other newspapers in Ireland and England.

Unsurprisingly, Donovan became famous in medical circles as an expert on the effects of starvation on the human body, and often wrote for the *Lancet* and other medical journals. On January 2, 1847, he wrote in the *Cork Southern Reporter*:

*I know, Sir, I run the risk of having my statements disbelieved: but I solemnly swear no words can exaggerate and no one can describe the misery that the people of this neighbourhood are enduring. Their cup of affliction is filled to overflowing, and I fear they are doomed to drink it to the very dregs. [...] I now call upon those living in more favoured localities, in the name of the God of Mercy, to give from their superfluities for the relief of people who I believe in my soul are the most afflicted upon earth.*

Dr. Donovan’s stories included those of a family of six children, mother, and grandmother, all with fever, being looked after by a six-year-old, who was now also sick; a mother who could not get a coffin for her dead child because she had no clothes to wear and so could not leave her cabin; and men suffering what Dr.



Figure 11 | "John Francis Maguire MP" (Founder of the Cork Examiner) (Vanity Fair, March 23, 1872)

Donovan called “road sickness,” a fever “being almost peculiar to the naked and famished labourers who, at the expense of their own lives, are obliged to go through the mockery of work in cutting up the best ground in the country.”

Several days later the *Cork Examiner*, with the dramatic headline, “Death! Death! Death!” told of a poor-rate collector, named Joseph Driscoll of Schull, who entered a house in Rossbrine and found three men dead. In nearby Drishane he found a woman and her three children dead; her husband died before them and his corpse remained in the cabin, with the rest of the family. The article recounts a number of other deaths, and ends: “So you see what a state this once plentiful country is now reduced to; and the general opinion is that matters are not at the worst” (*Cork Examiner*, January 18, 1847).

The *Constitution* was somewhat more restrained. In general its editorial line was that the government should act to save the suffering people, partially for fear of the advantage the Famine could hand to the supporters of the Repeal movement. Although the *Constitution* was a conservative newspaper, it was not without sympathy for the starving and dying. Dr. Robert Trail, Rector and Vicar of Schull, often wrote to the *Constitution* with graphic and moving accounts of the distress in West Cork. He wrote on January 7, 1847, of his own parish of 2,000,

*one of the largest rural parishes in the kingdom [...] and one of the most miserable and impoverished that can be conceived [...] Free am I to acknowledge that until I witnessed it, I could not have given it credence [...] our existence here is one stream of unmitigated sorrow and distress.*

Having reported so much about the impact of the Famine, Dr. Trail himself died of fever.

The two Repeal papers tried hard to find ways to effectively describe and tell the story of the Famine. The *Cork Examiner*, aware of its duty to a wider community, was conscious of its role within a civil society to record and bear witness:

*Progress of Famine, Fever and Death*

*Sad, indeed is our duty – to record, each succeeding post, the progress of famine and disease, and to number the dead, as they are dropped into the grave without coffin or shroud. But it is a duty which, however painful, must – for the sake of those who yet survive – be gone through.*

*Reader! Glance your eye over our columns this day and what meets your eye wherever it turns? Hideous facts, more startling in their woe and horror than any fiction – death in every paragraph – desolation in every district – whole families lying down in fever – hovels turned into charnel-houses – entire villages prostrate in sickness or hushed in the last sleep (January 8, 1847).*

Recalling Vernon's suggestion that the humanitarian narrative emerged out of the reporting of coroners' inquests, we can look at the sort of coverage the newspapers were willing to give to inquests. The *Cork Examiner* reported on a number of inquests in what had become typical coverage:

*Progress of Starvation and Death in the West*

*Awful Destitution in Bantry*

*Nine Inquests – Ten Deaths*

*Inquests held on the bodies of Mary Hooleban and Timothy Hooleban*

*Bridget Hooleban, being sworn in – stated that on the 6th of this month her son Timothy Hooleban died, and that on the 16th of this month her daughter Mary Hooleban died; her son Timothy Hooleban was 11 months old; she was nursing him and he had for some time been pining away, she not having anything at her breast for him, having lost it for want of sufficient food; he used be screeching for food and she could not give him any; her daughter Mary, also died of want of food; she was pining away for some time; her husband was employed on the roads, and after paying for a bit of bread he used to take while at work she could not get any more of his week's earnings than 3s 6d and sometimes not more than 2s to support herself and five children; some days could not procure more than one quart of meal for herself and the five children; the children used be constantly crying for something to eat; one of her boys used go to the strand and bring home sea weed for himself and the other children; after eating the sea weed they used to drink large quantities of water which always made them sick.*

*Dr McCarthy sworn – Stated that he saw Timothy Hooleban dead; he was five days dead when he saw him; the body was a perfect skeleton; made a post mortem examination; found the stomach and bowels completely empty with the exception of almost a glass of fluid in the stomach with some fibrous matter; his death was unquestionably caused by want of food; he never entered into a more wretched hovel; the children were all but naked, wretched skeletons, four of them stretched in a sort of bed together.*

*Dr Jague sworn, said – He saw the body of Mary Hooleban; has no doubt that her death was caused by want of food; the body was a mere skeleton, did not make a post mortem examination as the cause of death was evident.*

*Verdict, "Timothy and Mary Hooleban died of starvation" (January 22 1847).*

Dr. Donovan reported: "Disease is in every hovel and death in every hamlet. Corpses in many instances remain uninterred until they become black and bloated from putrefaction, and are then consigned to the grave without the adjunct of a coffin" (*Cork Southern Reporter*, January 26, 1847).

But acts of philanthropy were also covered. The *Southern Reporter*, in its January 21 edition, reported that the “lady of Michael Galway, Esq, JP, of Skibbereen” was overseeing the making of clothes for the “poor, naked and famished women of that town.” Using some of her own money and money donated from others, including Dr. Donovan, up to twenty women had been provided with “a warm petticoat, bed gown, two chemises and two caps, and the making of those articles occupying ten poor families for two days, enabling them to earn at the rate of 2s a day each family.” The women had to appear each morning at the soup shop dressed in the clothing, “for the purpose of preventing the articles from being pawned.”

However, it would give a wrong impression to suggest that the Famine dominated the three newspapers. While the writing about the hunger and deprivation was the most graphic, the newspapers still contained much material taken from the British papers, especially financial news – after all, their audience mainly consisted of the commercial middle classes – but also accounts of racing at the Curragh, the latest fashions, lists of promotions in the army, and shipping news. If reports that this season, “caps are worn very small, showing the hair as much as possible with a profusion of flowers” or that “furs are fashionable at this moment for trimming dresses of pink and white satin” or “flowers will be universally worn this season,” as reported by the *Constitution* in January, appears shocking in the midst of such devastation, it should be recalled that it is not inconceivable for our contemporary press to publish an image of a starving child beside an advertisement for luxury goods.

Newspapers were not above what today might be described as tabloid coverage. On September 3, 1847, the *Cork Examiner* published, under the headline “Terrible if True,” an unsubstantiated rumor concerning a “gallant officer of high rank, and lately on duty in the garrison of Cork,” who, it seems, was having an affair and was “assailed” by his wife returning from a party where he had “indulged freely of the grape.” The lady killed the officer. “It is said the lady is Irish and of an ancient family,” it concluded breathlessly.

In September the *Cork Examiner* had a “Situations Vacant” advertisement for a suitably qualified person to be matron at the Skibbereen Workhouse, with a salary of thirty pounds a year “with one ration.” Further up the same page was an advertisement for “Chabbel & Co., the French Hat Company” in Nile Street, Cork, that “begs leave to acquaint the public generally and county dealers particularly that they have opened for business at the above house and from their experience in Paris, London, Dublin and Cork are emboldened to solicit a share of public patronage.” And while racing at Cashel might have been “excellent, the weather favorable, the attendance both numerous and fashionable” (October 4, 1847), the regular correspondent from West Cork, Jeremiah O’Callaghan, could write with some passion:



*The lands of Currough were destrained by the under agent of the Rev S Townsend of Castletownsend. Not a head of cattle, not a stack of corn is to be seen on the roads. So much, Mr Editor, for the misery; now for the splendour of this wretched locality. Is it not strange when all parties dread a recurrence of last winter's horrors, that picnic parties and balls, were never, even in the midst of plenty, of such frequent occurrence in this place?*

*'Tis a shame that persons who did not contribute for the relief of their suffering brothers, should now lavish so much in wanton extravagance and riot. Yes riot; for, at the last public ball (the married gent's ball) the conduct of our would be aristocrats was no better than that of the lowest grades of society (Cork Examiner, September 17, 1847).<sup>15</sup>*

Politics and accounts of meetings take up a huge amount of space and compared to today, the Cork newspapers of 1847 carried a surprising amount of foreign news, from continental Europe, the US and the Empire. The bulk of the “news,” however, was long reports of meetings, or applications for planning for new railways, as well as what might be regarded as routine coverage: letters to the editor, accounts of crimes and “outrages.” If these outrages were associated with the Famine, that was not always made clear.

The election of 1847 took up a lot of coverage. The first article relating to the election appeared in the *Cork Examiner* in June when it declared a policy emanating from O'Connell's supporters calling for support for only “Conciliation Hall” repealers was a “Mischevious policy.” “Conciliation Hall” was the name given to those who supported O'Connell's wing of the Repeal movement.<sup>16</sup> The policy was designed to isolate Young Ireland, the more radical repeal group surrounding the *Nation* newspaper.<sup>17</sup>

Newspaper layout and design was primitive. Page one was often used entirely for advertisements. If a major story appeared where today we might expect to see the lead story, that was possibly by accident as newspapers of the 1840s in Ireland did not prioritize news in the way that became common later, with headlines running across columns. Irish newspapers consisted of rigid columns, with stories and headlines kept within them. Access to the British press was boasted about, and stories migrated in both directions. The captains of vessels that brought the British press to Cork were thanked by name in the newspaper. Across Ireland, stories were taken wholesale from the Dublin press. Inevitably, the sources chosen reflected the political bias of the newspapers, with stories from the pro-Repeal newspapers, such as the *Pilot*, the *Freeman's Journal*, and the *Nation* appearing in the *Cork Examiner* and *Southern Reporter*, while the *Constitution* preferred to take material from the conservative and unionist *Evening Mail* and the *Packet*.

In January the *Cork Southern Reporter* received a copy of the Queen's speech “By Express.” “Most Important,” it pronounced in capital letters.

*The Rose Steamer after an extremely rapid run, considering the foggy nature of the weather, has brought the SPEECH delivered from the Throne by Her Majesty on Tuesday at Two o'clock. We anticipate our usual period of Publication, in order to place it in our readers' hands at the earliest possible moment (January 21, 1847).*

There were other examples of newspapers bringing out editions to cover particular events. A second edition of the *Cork Southern Reporter* reported on the sinking of a ship named the "Stephen Whitney" on November 16, 1874.<sup>18</sup> Throughout 1847 there were special editions, express editions and supplements, mainly concerned with politics and with getting information concerning debates or speeches given in the Westminster parliament or from the administration in London. Such tactics were designed to give value, reassuring the readers of particular newspapers that they were getting the news before others, and proving that journalism was a unique product that could sell newspapers.

But while the *ILN* might name and interview Bridget O'Donnel, the *Southern Reporter* newspaper, like its counterparts, remained wary of quoting ordinary people. A report from Sherkin Island stated: "I arrived last night on this island and waited on the Rev. Mr. Fenton, who is, I believe, the only person of any respectability residing on this or Cape Clear Island."

All three newspapers covered the death of Daniel O'Connell on May 15, 1847. Despite the use of fast steamers to get news to Cork it still took until May 24 for the *Cork Examiner* to report O'Connell's death:

*The London journals of Saturday morning, which reached this city yesterday morning by the Sabrina, Captain Parker, brought the intelligence of the rumoured death of the illustrious Regenerator of his country [...] Immediately the news reached here, it spread rapidly amongst all classes of the citizens. There was no other conversation among groups which thronged the public streets, on board the steamers, or in private circles. There was general gloom and mournful depression observable in the countenances and the voices of every man, woman and child, as they questioned each other as to the certainty or otherwise of the demise of the "Great Catholic Tribune".*

The *Southern Reporter* and the *Cork Examiner* put black borders around every column of the newspaper [Figure 12]. Not surprisingly, the *Cork Constitution* did not, but did give extensive coverage. The black borders remained for some weeks, and were replaced by a border running around the outside of the paper only, for many months according O'Connell the full bereavement respect denied to so many. The *Southern Reporter* carried a column on Daniel O'Connell's "Life and Times" in every issue for over three months.

In July 1847 there was optimistic speculation as to the health of the potato crop in all three newspapers: "The appearance of the potato crop in the division of

Donoughmore is up to the present moment most encouraging to the farmers who have speculated upon a healthy crop this year” (*Cork Constitution*, June 8, 1847). Or, under the headline “The potato crop – More Cheering Accounts”: “We assure our readers that no subject occupies more of our attention than the consideration of the potato crop, its appearance and promise” (*Cork Examiner*, June 11, 1847). With regard to most predictions based on early crops, Mr. Horace Townsend was quoted as saying he had asked all those attending a meeting of the Blarney Relief Committee “and there was not one present who had any apprehensions about his potato crop. They had never looked better.” But such optimism did not last long.

In September 1847, the *Southern Reporter* warned that, despite good harvests, further calamity awaited because the amount of land under cultivation was about two thirds less than necessary to support the population.

In the midst of tentative optimism about the harvest, an account of rioting in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, was carried in the *Cork Examiner*, in response to the continuing export of food. In its detail and first-hand observations it is, by any standard, a good piece of reporting. The editorializing was common at the time; notions of objectivity come much later in the nineteenth or even twentieth century:

*the impoverished labourers assembled in great numbers, thinking to intimidate the assembled ratepayers and magistrates [...] The riotous conduct of those assembled created considerable alarm, and the majority of the shops were closed during the day. The magistrates ordered out the military and police, but they were hooted and pelted with stones. One fellow was arrested in the act of throwing a stone at the County Inspector, who escaped without receiving much injury, though struck by it. [...] [O]ne soldier of the 27th regiment received a desperate cut in the face from a missile thrown by one of the mob. The forbearance of the police and military was very great under the trying scenes passing before them as they refrained from dealing “death blows” from their muskets in return for the many injuries attempted to be inflicted upon them, and for which they deserve the gratitude and esteem of the well disposed people of Dungarvan (September 18, 1847).*

Despite its remoteness, West Cork was accessible. It was near a major city, and the copious accounts of the Famine in the county’s three newspapers meant London editors were guaranteed stories and illustrations if they sent reporters and artists. Dr. Donovan’s “Diary of a Dispensary Doctor” in the *Southern Reporter* ran throughout 1847 and 1848, and was reprinted in the *ILN* and other papers, and quoted in many more. The *Cork Examiner*’s special correspondent in Skibbereen, the aforementioned Jeremiah O’Callaghan, had regular dispatches from the area that were often picked up and carried by other newspapers in Ireland and England. There was no risk in sending staff to West Cork, because editors were assured of good copy. Another factor was the sheer horror of what the editors of English papers were reading in the Cork newspapers, and the need to verify it. The *ILN* explained why it sent its special correspondent James Mahony to West Cork:

*accounts from the provincial papers continue to detail the unmitigated suffering of the starving peasantry [...] With the policy of ascertaining the accuracy of the frightful statements received from the West, and of placing them in unexaggerated fidelity before our readers, a few days since we commissioned our Artist, Mr. James Mahony of Cork to visit a seat of extreme suffering viz., Skibbereen and its vicinity* (February 13, 1847).

Mahony's mission was to authenticate reports in the *Cork Examiner*, *Southern Reporter* and other newspapers, which had been quoted in the *ILN*, and ensure they were not exaggerated. His illustrated report confirmed that they were not.

There is little doubt that the extent of the coverage and the presence of a newspaper had an influence on the degree of relief, philanthropy, and charity an area might receive. The centrality of the press to the level of relief and awareness that West Cork received was such that it bred a form of resentment. As late as 1879, during the Land War, the editor of the *Connaught Telegraph*, James Daly, commented bitterly on the arrival of reporters from Dublin newspapers to Mayo:

*It is the first time they ever discovered the unfortunate County Mayo on the map of Ireland. They were forever poking at the Famine pits of Skibbereen, because there was a smart local doctor who wrote them up. [...] Two hundred thousand people died of hunger in Mayo, after living on nettles and asses' flesh, and the world never said as much as "God be merciful to them"* (qtd. in Lee 70).<sup>19</sup>

The newspapers of Cork were certainly aware of the idea of "civil society" and, in the midst of the catastrophe of the Famine, helped create it. They covered meeting after meeting: those of the Central Soup Committee; the Cork Relief Committee; the Cork Historical Society; the Cork Union; the District Relief Committee; the Poor Law guardians; and the Harbour Board, as well as courts and inquests. All were reported in the three newspapers. But the Famine is always a backdrop to everything written. If it is not a report from Dr. Donovan, Jeremiah O'Callaghan or Dr. Trail, it is a letter to the editor, another recipe for soup, or an article on how to use blighted potatoes, or what the British government should do to affect relief. In most editions can be found an article about the state of the Famine in Ireland, West Cork, or Skibbereen.



## CONCLUSION

Hugh Oram says it was not “the newspapers in Ireland that brought the enormity of the tragedy to the world’s attention. That task fell to journalists from outside the country.” He quotes the Irish-born journalist, William Howard Russell of the London *Times*, who later became famous for his coverage of the Crimea War: “I have never beheld sights so shocking as those which met my eyes on that famine tour” (63). What Oram failed to note was that it was the accounts that appeared in the Irish press, often reprinted in the British press, which attracted British correspondents like Russell to Ireland. Of course, the very view that Ireland was a different country was a contested one, and many editors and correspondents could hardly comprehend how a state as wealthy, advanced and influential as the United Kingdom could actually have within its borders anything as horrific and primitive as a famine of such extraordinary impact.

Melisa Fegan’s description of the tone of English press coverage – near-universal sympathy in 1845; “compassion fatigue” and suspicion in 1846-47; horror at rebellion and outrage in 1848; followed by near indifference – feels modern (6). Leslie Williams writes that “the coverage of the prolonged Irish famine in English newspapers and magazines is the source of a strange narrative that vacillates from intense sympathy to dismissive antipathy” (59). Aid agencies working with modern disasters in the developing world often complain that coverage today follows a similar pattern of sympathy that turns to what is known as “famine fatigue.”

That pattern was not followed in Ireland, however, where the Famine continued to dominate the press and had an impact on the development of the press itself. The Famine and the reduction in economic activity that accompanied it meant in some cases newspapers were forced to cease publishing, while others had to reduce pagination and the number of editions.

Some issues arising from the Famine were hardly covered at all, or covered badly. If a historian were to search for newspaper accounts of land clearances he or she would have to wait until a libel case in 1863, when a land agent in Co. Tipperary took an

action against a newspaper editor, Peter Gill of the *Tipperary Advocate*, who had accused him of being involved in forceful land clearance during the Famine period. That case received huge coverage.<sup>20</sup>

Many commentators note the emphasis on women and children in the coverage of the Famine. The illustrations in the English illustrated press opted to show the suffering of women and children particularly. In the articles of Dr. Donovan, for example, the description of the suffering of women and children and their wretchedness have a particular poignancy. In this we see something that prefigures later coverage of disasters. The American media academic, Susan Moeller, could almost be writing of the coverage of the Irish Famine, though here she is writing about coverage of contemporary famines:

*Starving children are the famine icon. An emaciated child is not yet associated with the stereotypes attached to its color, its culture, or its political environment. Skeletal children personify innocence abused. They bring moral clarity to the complex story of a famine. Their images cut through the social, economic, and political context to create an imperative statement (36).*

Reading the three newspapers published in Cork during the fateful year of 1847, it is clear that the technology which had allowed, for instance, the illustrated press to develop in Britain and other major centers, had not reached Cork. The Cork newspapers do not look very different to the newspapers of thirty years previous, but the content has changed emphatically. Colonial conditions and the state of Irish capitalism delayed many of the economic developments within the press that took place in Britain, but the Famine did speed up the entry of the press into modernity, and offered a training ground for a generation of journalists in the use of the human-interest story and the development of news values.

However, even if the technological changes had not impacted on the Irish press, Irish journalists were well aware of them. Their work attracted the illustrated artists to Ireland in order to verify what appeared to be unbelievable, a quasi-medieval event gnawing at the heart of the British Empire. The storytelling and the reporting of Irish journalists and editors ensured that the Famine became a world media event.

In the aftermath of the Famine, the local press was supported politically and financially by the development of towns with markets, shipping, roads, and railway stations. The role of the press in the elections, national and local, and also in the reporting of the many organizations that grew up in post-Famine Ireland, from co-operatives to trade unions, religious and sporting bodies, political and nationalist organizations, ensured it played an important role in the development of a civil society. The rapid economic growth evident throughout the late 1850s and the 1860s was dependent on the press.

Despite the declining population, the press developed and grew in the post-Famine period. Growing urbanization facilitated the development and distribution of the press, leading to an increase in the number of titles. The growth in the number of English speakers also helped a press that had developed mainly in the English language.

Reporters sitting in the coroner's courts, covering meetings of the Poor Law guardians, or editing accounts of death and starvation sent in by correspondents such as Dr. Daniel Donovan, led to many combining journalism with politics. Journalists were closer to the Famine than most professionals, other than doctors. In the face of the Famine, reporters harnessed their shock and outrage into a nascent nationalist press that was beginning to emerge in the 1840s. The politically committed journalist became commonplace, feeding into the Irish Party in Westminster and more radical political organizations, both in Ireland and abroad, so much so that by the end of the century journalists were hugely represented in both the constitutional and physical force traditions of Irish nationalism.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the Irish language and print culture in Ireland see Ó Tuathaigh; Ó Ciosáin; Ó Cuív; and Kelly and MacMurchaidh (15, 21).
- <sup>2</sup> What Leerssen, however, does not examine is the impact on Ireland of the changes that were taking place in England. Obviously the fall of Napoleon affected England and that, in some instances, had consequent impact on Ireland. Issues such as the development of a free press and taxation did affect Ireland, but so did the changes in English print culture.
- <sup>3</sup> O’Connell had been accused of sacrificing the Forty Shilling Franchise holders – those entitled to vote because they held land with a rental value of £2 or forty shillings – when he agreed to the terms of Catholic Relief Act (or Catholic Emancipation, passed in 1829), which raised the threshold to £10 or 240 shillings. He was willing to sacrifice the Forty Shilling Franchise holders, as he believed they were unable to vote contrary to the wishes of their landlords.
- <sup>4</sup> See endnote 17.
- <sup>5</sup> For further consideration of memorializing, see Marshall; and Mark-Fitzgerald.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Harcup (94-95).
- For a long time the interview was seen as part of the brashness and sensationalism considered integral to the US press. However, not all of the American press agreed with the interview. “A portion of the daily newspapers in New York are bringing the profession of journalism into contempt as far as they can, by a kind of toadyism or flunkeyism which they call interviewing,” said the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Nation*, a New York liberal journal, in 1869 described the interview as “generally the joint product of some humbug of a hack politician and another humbug of a newspaper reporter” (Silvester 5). Most histories of the interview tend to view it as a method of obtaining information from a well-known person. Its entry into the mainstream of the British press was via the movement known as the “new journalism,” of which the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Star* were strong advocates. The *Star* was edited by the Irish Parliamentary Party MP T.P. O’Connor. The *ILLN*’s interview with Bridget O’Donnell was arguably seen more as a mode of authenticating the images, rather than an article in itself.
- <sup>7</sup> After O’Connell had successfully campaigned for Catholic Emancipation and the end of discriminatory measures against the Irish Catholic majority in 1829, he turned his attention to the Act of Union. Passed in 1800, the Act of Union abolished the Irish parliament and made Britain and Ireland one political unit. The ultimately unsuccessful campaign for Repeal of the Act of Union would dominate the last years of O’Connell’s life. A version was finally granted in 1914 (Home Rule), but this development was overtaken by a more radical physical force nationalist movement taking the initiative due to a number of factors, including the Great War. That physical force movement organized the Easter Rising of 1916, which for a number of reasons, including the heavy-handed reaction of the British authorities, led to the War of Independence and the treaty with Britain that gave independence in 1922 to 26 counties, excluding six of the Ulster counties.
- <sup>8</sup> The Corn Laws were in force in the UK between 1815 and 1849 and were designed to restrict the importation of grain and so keep grain prices high, to the benefit of domestic growers – mainly aristocratic landowners and Conservative MPs. This was to the detriment of urban interests, whose middle-class voters and Liberal MPs favored free trade. The Anti-Corn Law League fought a successful campaign against the Corn Laws. However, it was the Irish Famine that led to the laws being repealed so grain could be imported – by a Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. Those who opposed Peel became the modern Conservative Party, while those Tories who supported Peel eventually merged with the Whigs to form the Liberal Party.

- <sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see Curran and Seaton. Their now almost standard work highlights the early nineteenth-century battle between middle-class and patrician reformers. Often the debates about newspaper taxes were couched in terms of freedom of the press versus social control. The reality was that it was between two views of capitalism: the free market versus protectionism, or middle-class campaigners against the aristocratic state.
- <sup>10</sup> For further discussion on the illustrated press and the Famine, see O'Sullivan.
- <sup>11</sup> A revival in the writing of press history has taken place with the founding of the Newspaper and Periodical History Forum of Ireland. However, little of this research deals with the period before 1850. Brian Inglis's 1954 work, *The Freedom of the Press in Ireland, 1784-1841*, still stands out as the only work concentrating on an earlier period.
- <sup>12</sup> In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas charts the emergence of a reasoning public out of the coffee houses, clubs and salons of eighteenth-century Europe, especially in London. It was discussions, informed by newspapers, that formed public opinion and a public sphere that operated as a check on unrepresentative government.
- <sup>13</sup> Writing about events somewhat later in the century, the old Fenian John Devoy, in his *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (1929) recalls how fellow Fenian and journalist William O'Donovan wrote Tory editorials for the unionist *Irish Times*, while at the same time the atheist Jack Adams was writing Catholic articles for *The Freeman's Journal* (317).
- <sup>14</sup> See Andrews (passim).
- <sup>15</sup> My attention was drawn to this quote by Ed O'Riordan's fascinating compilation of Famine stories, *In Terrible Discordance*.
- <sup>16</sup> Conciliation Hall on Burgh Quay, Dublin, was built as a meeting place for O'Connell's Loyal National Repeal Association. Towards the end of the century it was rebuilt as a concert hall. The concert hall was closed in 1928 and the building was rebuilt as the home of the *Irish Press* newspaper.
- <sup>17</sup> The *Nation* was founded by three journalists as a repeal newspaper. Its first editor was Charles Gavan Duffy. While it supported Repeal it soon came into conflict with O'Connell, who was aware he could not control it and that it was a radical nationalist newspaper that espoused a strong non-sectarian editorial line, with support for agitation and cultural nationalism.
- <sup>18</sup> On 10 November, 1847, in thick fog, the captain of the *Stephen Whitney* mistook the Crookhaven lighthouse for the one at the Old Head of Kinsale. At around 10 p.m. the ship struck the western tip of West Calf Island, completely breaking up within minutes, with a loss of ninety-two of the 110 passengers. The loss of the ship triggered the decision to replace the Cape Clear Island lighthouse with one on Fastnet Rock.
- <sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Tadgh Foley, Professor Emeritus, National University of Ireland, Galway, for drawing this quote to my attention.
- <sup>20</sup> See Dr. Denis Marnane, unpublished paper presented to the Newspaper and Periodical History Forum of Ireland annual conference, Dublin City University, 2013.

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## IMAGES

### Cover

**Margaret Allen**  
1830-1914  
*Bad News in Troubled Times*  
1886  
Oil on canvas  
38 x 32 in (96.5 x 81.3 cm)  
© Ireland's Great Hunger Museum,  
Quinnipiac University

### Figure 1

Detail of Figure 9

### Figure 2

**Daniel Macdonald**  
1820-1853  
*Kerry Peasantry listening to the  
account of the Conviction of Dan  
O'Connell and the Traversers,  
at the State Trials in Dublin,  
Feb. 1844*  
1844  
Image provided by Kevin Coughlan

### Figure 3

*"Bridget O'Donnel and Her  
Children"*  
*The Illustrated London News*  
December 22, 1849

### Figure 4

Pages 404 & 405 from  
*The Illustrated London News*  
December 22, 1849

### Figure 5

US Postage Stamp of  
Horace Greeley  
(founder of the *New York Tribune*)  
1961

### Figure 6

**Unkles and Klasen**  
*Daniel O'Connell, M.P.*  
1835  
Print  
8.4 x 5.3 in (21.4 x 13.5 cm)  
© National Library Ireland

### Figure 7

Front page of first issue of the  
*The Illustrated London News*  
May 14, 1842

### Figure 8

**Beatrice M. Franklin**  
*Portrait of Sir Charles Gavan  
Duffy* (1816-1903, politician and  
editor of the *Nation*)  
Oil on canvas  
7.7 x 5.7 in (19.5 x 14.5 cm)  
© National Gallery of Ireland

### Figure 9

**Henry McManus**  
c. 1810-1878  
*Reading "The Nation"*  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 14 in (30.5 x 35.5 cm)  
© National Gallery of Ireland

### Figure 10

**James Mahony**  
*"Old Chapel Lane, Skibbereen"*  
*The Illustrated London News*  
February 13, 1847

### Figure 11

*"Statesmen, No. 109 - A Home  
Ruler"* (Image of John Francis  
Maguire MP, founder of the  
*Cork Examiner*)  
*Vanity Fair*  
March 23, 1872  
Image provided by The  
City College of New York

### Figure 12

*Southern Reporter* (page  
with black borders announcing  
the death of Daniel O'Connell)  
May 27, 1847  
©The British Library Board

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otherwise noted.

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