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'BLESSED WITH THE FACULTY OF MIRTHFULNESS': The 'New Journalism' and Irish Local Newspapers in 1900

Mark Wehrly

THROUGHOUT THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, several developments contrived – mostly indirectly – to make newspaper publishing in Britain an attractive business prospect. These included rising literacy levels, the abolition of taxes on newspapers in 1855 and innovations in the way newspapers were produced and distributed. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards this had the effect, in both Britain and Ireland, of increasing in multiples the number of different newspapers that were published (Cullen, 1989: 4–5). Likewise, in Dublin as in London, lively debates took place on the desirability of these developments, and the question of the social function of journalism was widely discussed (Anon, 1858; Anon, 1863; Elrington, 1867; Autolycus, 1879). One of the most discernible changes in British journalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – and one also that intensified this debate – was a movement to a 'new journalism'. This constituted a shift from scholarship and austerity to lively populism and sensationalism; both through the employment of typographical devices made possible by new technologies and through relatively recent innovations such as the inverted pyramid, human-interest news values, and interviews. Thus, rather than working to educate, as the older journalists saw their function, 'new journalism' shocked and entertained while it informed (Lee, 1976: 101). But while the 'new journalism' became a central focus of the modernisation the profession underwent at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain, it has rarely been considered in studies of Irish journalism – despite the obvious parallels.

It is all too tempting to associate journalistic developments in Britain with the Irish press. Newspaper publishing in Ireland had expanded to such an extent that by the final decade of the nineteenth century, newspaper reading was entering what Marie-Louise Legg calls a 'golden age' (1999: 174). Particularly in the regions, newspapers multiplied over a short period of time; in Sligo, for instance, between 1885 and 1927, no fewer than thirteen local newspapers were in operation at one time or another (McTernan, 2000: 519–26). Given this heightened production activity, it might be reasonable to suggest this occurred in tandem with developments in Britain. Ireland did, after all, reap the same benefits (or drawbacks, depending on one's position) from the 1855 abolition of newspaper taxes, and also saw rising literacy levels and technological innovations (Cullen, 1989: 11). But there are good reasons why Irish media historians recoil from discussions of 'new journalism'. Firstly, implicit in the descriptions of 'new journalism' in British newspaper historiography is a grand-narrative approach to writing which was, according to Legg, difficult if not impossible to apply in Ireland (1999:

6–7). The distinctly local character of Irish politics – and the close relationship between Irish politics and journalism during the period – made it virtually impossible to ignore the local press, which led to an obvious practical concern:

One of the problems about writing about newspapers is the sheer size of the text itself. Severe self-discipline is required not to get involved in reading all the advertisements, invaluable though they may be as a source for the history of consumerism, or in pursuing minor heroes, lost dogs, train accidents or petty crimes. In one sense, in order to write the history of the press, one should refrain from reading newspapers at all. [... My] purpose was not to work on the events reported in the newspapers (even if they did have an effect on national politics), but rather to disinter those who ran and wrote the newspapers themselves and the effect of legislation, government policy and events on them. If an event did affect a newspaper – as the Galway County by-election petition hearing of 1872 revealed the role of the Tuam Herald in organising and subverting the by-election campaign for their candidate – then that was of importance to me. (Legg, 2007)

This is not to say Marie-Louise Legg simply ignored ‘new journalism’ in Ireland on the grounds of practicality.¹ Rather, the heightened political realities which led to the local press becoming such a force in the late-nineteenth century also impinged on the proliferation of ‘new journalism’ there. Thus, the modernisation of the Irish press was not allowed to occur at the same rate as that of its British counterpart due to the tensions of the national question that would continually exist, in different guises, from the 1880s until the early 1920s (Foley, 2004: 374). Further complicating matters, as this article will illustrate, is the difficulty in ascertaining what exactly was new about the ‘new journalism’.

Sligo and Fleet Street

In the case of Sligo, it is particularly easy to ignore these caveats and make easy associations with Fleet Street. In 1885, for instance, just as P.A. McHugh embarked on what would become an influential career as editor of the *Sligo Champion*, W.T. Stead’s career-defining ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ – a shocking expose of a child prostitution ring operating in central London – was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (20 July 1885). Shortly thereafter, T.P. O’Connor was appointed editor of Henry Labouchere’s *Star* newspaper – his reputation for lively, populist prose making him more desirable than no less a figure than Viscount John Morley (Sheehy, 2004: 78). In 1888, O’Connor, too, would cement his journalistic reputation, driving the *Star*’s sensationalist coverage during the series of murders in the Whitechapel district (10 November 1888). Subsequent to their journalistic triumphs, both Stead and O’Connor wrote articles on what they saw to be the function of journalism. Stead’s ‘Government by Journalism’ and ‘The Future of Journalism’, both published in the *Contemporary Review* (1886; 1886a), and O’Connor’s ‘The New Journalism’, published in the *New Review* (1889), excitedly announce the possibilities journalism

¹ On the contrary – Legg references Stead’s ‘Government by Journalism’ as a credo by which the Land League operated, whether intentionally or not, in many localities (1999: 93).

held to further influence society. Together, these writings formed much of the ideological basis for 'new journalism', subsequently adapted by others for various purposes in such a way as to make a definition problematic. Alan Lee came closest to success here, describing 'new journalism' as a set of journalistic and typographic devices aimed at making the newspaper more readable (1976: 103).

From his arrival as editor of the *Sligo Champion* in 1885, meanwhile, P.A. McHugh was well and truly a political animal. He quickly established himself as a leading figure in local affairs, and while he was initially unsuccessful in his attempts to gain the Irish Party nomination for any of the Sligo or Leitrim constituencies, the fall of Parnell paved the way for his election to parliament for the first time in 1893 (Ní Liatháin, 1998: 17). He became aware of the changes that were taking place in journalism – T.P. O'Connor also happened to be a prominent member of the Irish Party. It is not surprising as a result that McHugh spoke often, and with admiration, of the 'pioneering work' of O'Connor (*Sligo Champion*, 17 June 1893).

One of the core differences between the old journalism and the new, according to Lee, was the persistence of a lighter literary touch (1976: 112). Despite the easy associations above, there was little in the way of a 'lighter touch' in the *Sligo Champion* until the late-1890s. It was then that Arthur Malley – a Protestant, unionist veteran of the Sligo newspaper industry – was controversially welcomed into the fold at the *Sligo Champion*, where he set about making the newspaper a more diverse product, one which embraced the light and the literary in addition to fulfilling its political commitments as the then-official organ of the United Irish League in the northwest. Born in 1840 in Castlebar, Co Mayo, Malley had been well-known to the reading public of Sligo for some time before he joined the *Sligo Champion* in 1897 (McTernan, 2000: 378). From 1876 he was a journalist in the unionist *Sligo Independent*, where he gained a reputation for literary talent, originality and humour. Indeed, even his nationalist counterparts paid tribute to him when he left Sligo in 1887 in an attempt to further his career in London:

Mr Malley was for many years a familiar figure at the public boards of Sligo, with whose routine he was thoroughly acquainted ... As editor of the *Sligo Independent* he showed a keen appreciation of the tastes of the Orange Party in Sligo, for which he wrote. As an all-round man he stood deservedly in high profession, being regarded as one of the most accomplished journalists in the West of Ireland. It will simply be impossible for our contemporary to replace him. (*Sligo Champion*, 11 June 1887)

However, beneath this affable exterior, Malley was a deeply flawed individual. By 1890 his family had disowned him owing to his 'intemperate habits' and he foundered as a journalist in London. Upset by his failure, he made an abortive attempt on his own life in 1892, after which police contacted Bernard Collery, a friend of Malley's who was serving as nationalist MP for North Sligo (*Sligo Champion*, 2 January 1892). After a stint as a journalist at the *Nemsletter* in Belfast, he returned to Sligo in 1897 where he joined the editorial staff at the *Sligo Champion*, the nationalist newspaper he had directed many an editorial against during his time with the *Sligo Independent*. Malley's tenure at the *Sligo Champion* lasted until his sudden death in 1904 (McTernan, 2000: 381).

Malley's most notable literary contribution to the *Sligo Champion* was a 'Comic History of Sligo'. It was hardly remarkable that the *Champion* engaged in the popularisation of the past in this way – local newspapers in Sligo and elsewhere displayed eagerness in this area. For these newspapers, there were a number of different uses for this – political, commercial and journalistic. The use of history to generate a local solidarity divorced from the political present was embraced particularly by the unionist press. For instance, the editor of the *Sligo Times*, Bob Smyllie,² ran a serial on the history of Sligo that was not infused with political rhetoric one way or another in its treatment of heritage and folklore (10 April 1910). Under William Peebles in the 1920s the *Sligo Independent* had another, equally apolitical, use for the past. In 1923, notice was given of a new column in which material would be taken out of old files of the *Independent* (*Sligo Independent*, 21 March 1923). The column was called 'Peeps into Sligo's Past', and relied on a nostalgia element that is synonymous even with local newspapers of the present. This seized upon a popular response to the 'new journalism', and the modern newspaper's symbolism of hectic modern life: the propensity to retreat back into the newspapers of the previous century. Writing in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1901, Louis Brindley highlighted this, writing of the reward and value of keeping old newspapers as reminders of simpler times. Brindley (1901) contended that while technologically, newspapers had improved a great deal as a form of enlightenment and literary satisfaction, they were a poor relation to their hundred-year-old predecessors. There was no more satisfying a way to spend a free afternoon, he continued, than reading through a pile of century-old newspapers. That the *Sligo Independent* was reproducing journalistic material from its past not only indicated that the newspaper itself was becoming part of the entertainment, but also that there was still at least a nostalgia for the pre-new journalistic past on the part of the editor. As for the readers, Peebles – like Smyllie – hoped to play on the local element of the history, and in his case it proved a success as the *Independent* continued to grow in circulation and readership throughout the 1920s (*Sligo Independent*, 21–28 March 1923). Of course, these examples of the popularisation of Sligo's past in the newspapers shunned the obvious political energy that could be harnessed, and constituted a potent rejection, rather than an affirmation, of the 'new journalism'.

At the same time, the nationalist *Connachtman* was continuing to 'plunder the past' (Legg, 1999: 93) in a much more political manner – through the glorification of fallen heroes of Irish nationalism. This was a specific example of something that had been generally ongoing for some time before that newspaper's editor, R.G. Bradshaw, had even arrived in Sligo. It helped teach readers of nationalist newspapers new ways to hate the government of Britain – inflaming 'the passions of the people by rhetorical descriptions of the wrongs of other days'. Although the Gaelic League

² Originally from Carntyne in Glasgow, Bob Smyllie was the father of future *Irish Times* editor, Robert Maire Smyllie. He edited the *Sligo Independent* during a successful period for that paper in the 1890s, when it supplanted the *Sligo Chronicle* as the foremost Conservative journal in Sligo. An inheritance from a wealthy uncle enabled him to start his own newspaper, the *Sligo Times*, in 1909. The newspaper only lasted five years, having been beset by difficulties. In 1912, the offices were destroyed by a fire, and even though Smyllie soldiered on for some time after, his venture was finally killed off when it came to light that his accountant had been embezzling advertising and printing revenue and had fled to America (Oram, 1983: 136). The issue of the *Sligo Times* was abruptly halted in February 1914, and the following month an item appeared in the *Sligo Champion* taken from the most recent edition of *Stubbs' Weekly Gazette* which confirmed that Smyllie had gone bankrupt (13 March 1914).

was involved in the exploration of the past, they viewed the local press with disdain for their use of this method. Douglas Hyde summarised this disdain thus: 'The man who reads Irish MSS and respects Ossianic poetry is a higher and more interesting type than the man whose mental training is confined to spelling through an article in *United Ireland*.' Martin O'Brennan's *Connaught Patriot* was in the 1870s and 1880s one of the foremost of those newspapers which set out to popularise Irish history and folklore for the nationalist project, but examples of this can be gleaned from almost any locality (Legg, 1999: 94–7).

Perhaps the two most effective exponents of the politicisation of popular history in the Sligo press were Charles Kingston, the editor of the *Sligo Star*; and R.G. Bradshaw during the *Connachtman*'s fractious run in the 1920s. The *Star* ran a serialised history series in 1900, entitled 'Sligo: Past and Present', in which the author's comments on 1798 were particularly vitriolic in their anti-British sentiment (12 April 1900). Bradshaw, writing in the *Connachtman* in 1921, also harked back to this, printing articles on particular instances from the 1798 Rebellion which highlighted the brutality of the crown forces (19 September 1921) to generate a renewal of the kind of hate-mongering that Legg described when dealing with O'Brennan in the 1870s.

However, as Legg also notes, between O'Brennan's historical writing in the 1870s and Bradshaw's in the 1920s, there was also inherent in Irish nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century a conflict between this appeal to the past and the desire to modernise (1999: 98). This was the conflict Ian Sheehy (2004) illustrated when he dealt with the career of T.P. O'Connor at the *Star* newspaper in London in the 1880s. Before the turn of the century, nationalists proclaimed that 'there was no better type of Irishman' than O'Connor. However, by 1910, he would be the subject of novelist W.P. Ryan's ire in *The Plough and the Cross* for the extent to which constitutional nationalism had anglicised him and diluted his idea of what it meant to be Irish. This constituted a new standard being set by Irish nationalists (Sheehy, 2004: 76). It was one that Bradshaw would emulate in *An Connachtach* in the 1920s. Before that, however, there were a range of viewpoints on how Irish nationalist editors – and any other editors for that matter – would use the past in their editorial mission. O'Connor and other modernisers within the Irish Party, it is evident, were exasperated with the romanticism of the Gaelic League, and in some cases even with those editors, like Kingston at the *Sligo Star*, who wrote popular histories for nationalist edification.³

The 'Comic History of Sligo'

Before the emergence of Bradshaw and the new nationalism in Sligo, P.A. McHugh was in many ways a popular disciple of O'Connor's, having been established as a vital cog of the Irish Party by the 1890s, and proudly sitting in Westminster, first for North Leitrim and later for North Sligo. The *Sligo Champion*, still under his editorial reign, produced in 1899 perhaps the most potent ridicule of the popularisation of history within the newspaper. It was called 'A Comic History of Sligo',⁴ and writ-

³ See Sheehy, 2004: 79 and Legg, 1999: 101. O'Connor's Irish Party colleagues who became tarred with the same brush, including McHugh, were seen not only to have turned their back on the scholarly approach to cultural nationalism espoused by the Gaelic League, but also the popular approach, which the League reviled. ⁴ Arthur Malley, 'A Comic History of Sligo', serialised in the *Sligo Champion*, first appearing on 27 Sep. 1899, and subsequently on 4 Oct. 1899, 11 Oct. 1899, 18 Oct. 1899, 1 Nov. 1899, 8 Nov. 1899, 15 Nov. 1899, 22 Nov. 1899, 29 Nov. 1899, 6 Dec. 1899, 13 Dec. 1899, 3 Mar. 1900, and 10 Mar. 1900.

ten by Malley under the pen-name 'Champion Plagiarist'. First and foremost, the 'Comic History' was a parody of the writing of history itself. In his introduction, Malley began with the statement that: 'Historians as a rule like to write introductions.' Continuing, he described the motivations of learned men such as:

Confucius, Julius Caesar, Goldsmith, Lord Macauley, Mr Froude, Mr Leckey, Col Wood-Martin [a local historian], and several other distinguished men whose names I forget [who] all took off their coats, turned up their sleeves, and took to writing history, just as if they had nothing else to do; and no matter how the thermometer stood they wrote introductions. (4 October 1899)

The parodying description of historical writing persisted with an analysis of the sources Malley would avail of. As well as taking information from other sources, he claimed, he would draw on his imagination. His defence for doing so entailed preposterous descriptions of the loss of ancient sources of information on the locality, such as the 'Morocco-bound volumes stitched in calf' that had been eaten by a wild goat in Glencar. He also wrote of the fact that the Assyrian MSS disclosed the way of spelling Sligo in ancient times as 'Sly-goe', in which case he called the natives 'Sly-goers' (18 October 1899). The comical misinterpretations and preposterous claims of the historian were further lampooned in the following description of Sligo town:

The town of Sligo possesses great antiquity. Here Lot's wife was born; here Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, was educated; here Belchazzar was buried; here Romulus and Remus were married; here Jack the Giant Killer's father served his apprenticeship, and it was here that Antony first met Cleopatra. If the boulders of the streets of Sligo could speak, the stories they would tell of what they saw and heard would stagger humanity! Sligo started growing early in life, and although it was pruned down now and again by 'proud invaders', it always held its own, as a town anxious to extend itself and prove to the world it was no mushroom citie. When Galway, Cork, Derry, Belfast, Bellaghy and Ballydrihid were hamlets, trying to elbow themselves into notoriety, the town of Sligo was an enfranchised borough, having twenty-four members of parliament, a mayor, a recorder, a hangman, a chucker-out, and only one policeman. (22 November 1899)

Throughout it all, one of Malley's supposed sources was the 'Book of Ballymote', which he described as:

Apparently well rubbed ... with wet thumbs and dirty fingers. It was found by a friend of mine ... It has 52 pages and each page is nice and thick ... There are pictures of the kings who bore clubs and apparently dug with spades; and queens who wore their hearts upon their sleeves, or diamonds – red diamonds – upon their light shoulders. (22 November 1899)

He also claimed to have a copy of the Annals of the Four Masters, stating that 'this quartet consisted of a school master, workhouse master, a Master of Arts, and master mason – not a free and accepted, but a regular downright dry-wall mason, who worked according to the fair wages resolution of the House of Commons' (22 November 1899).

Malley's description of the Book of Ballymote not only lampooned the writing of local history, it also exhibited a satire that was geared more to the present locality. 'It was a good old book,' he wrote of it, adding that 'the only book which is nowadays better known in Ye Citie of Ballymote is the Clerk of Petty Sessions' swearing book, by which modern Dogberrys and good citizens are made to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth!' Indeed, the 'Comic History of Sligo' was as much a satire of present-day local affairs as it was of the writing of local history in newspapers. Malley frequently undertook comical descriptions and caricatures of County Court Judges, members of the Board of Guardians, and always referred to the now-defunct Grand Jury as 'the late Grand Jury (RIP)' (22 November 1899).

However, there was an even more frivolous sense of ridicule evoked by the 'Comic History of Sligo'. Indeed, perhaps the keenest social commentary to be gained from Malley's work was the fact that while the most ridiculed groups in the piece included politicians, there was also no escape for members of the legal profession or doctors. Malley wrote of the harmony enjoyed in ancient Sligo when there were no doctors or lawyers, saying that 'people lived a long time and died rich, and there were no equity suits over their assets when they were resting peaceably in their stone coffins' (29 November 1899). 'Cross mothers-in-law' were also highlighted in a chapter devoted entirely to their undesirability as a supposed 'class of people', illustrating his point with the fictitious events of 'The Days of Thiggum-Thu', a biography of 'a mighty monarch – a lineal descendant of the piper that played before Moses'. However, this supposed tirade also keenly demonstrated the relevance of the 'Comic History' as more than a mere send-up of historical writing itself; it was also a satire on contemporary life. Malley described how Thiggum-Thu had prospered until he married into a poor family, from which his mother-in-law, Mrs Celia Oatencake, 'ruled him and the country together – and both suffered'. He described her as having 'the courage of a man and the heart of a lion – and the tongue of a true woman' (6 December 1899).

With their new fortune, Thiggum-Thu's extended family lived in opulence, so much so that 'a want of money was soon the prevailing characteristic of this king'. A series of elections, the mother-in-law suggested, should be held to organise a parliament of the locals to arrange for supplies to be voted to the royal family. In these elections, women and children were given the vote. Mrs Oatencake prepared the entire list of voters herself, Malley claimed, by which time the total valid poll was set at 200,000 'and the poll could not close till every man, woman and child had voted!' The parliament that resulted from these elections met before Christmas, and just before an election of a speaker could take place, Mrs Oatencake herself took the chair – 'She swore very lustily that as she was a good talker she would make an excellent speaker' (6 December 1899). The parliament Malley described drew a parallel with the somewhat chequered history of Sligo borough, which had lost its right to elect its own MP when the Sligo and Cashel Disenfranchisement Act (1870) was passed by the House of Commons. This had come following a lengthy investigation into bribery and political corruption in the borough.⁵

Modern political institutions in Sligo borough were also lampooned by Malley, as was the case in the following passage:

⁵ House of Commons (1868–1869), *Minutes of evidence at trial of Sligo Borough Election Petition*, 3/85, vol. 49., p. 935.

The debate that followed [the King of Sligo's speech] was brilliant, elastic and of vermilion colour. The member for Ballydrihid called the member for Ballysummaghan a liar, and the latter replied in classic language, 'you're another'. The member for Bundduff called the member for Ballyconnell 'a thief and a rascal', and the latter reminded the former that he never stole a laying goose. The king tried to frighten some of them by threatening to deprive them of their commission of the peace. The reporters of those days enjoyed life – theirs was no sinecure, especially as some of the members threatened to break every bone in their bodies when they would get them outside in a public house. The fun grew fast and furious, shillelaghs were whirled and hats were blocked and several members were suspended – from the rafters – by the public executioners. The majority decided (like a select vestry) that as it was not they chose the king, not a red cent would they vote him and they told him to go earn his bread in some honest way and not be loafing about with a crown on his head and a sceptre in his hand. The speaker (the mother-in-law) finding it impossible to keep order or get a hearing, although she went up to high 'g' in her shrieks, she at once called on the king to dissolve parliament, which he speedily did, bringing the master-at-arms and his attendants, with pitchforks, accompanied by bulldogs, mastiffs, red terriers etc. Soon there was a clearance, and 'who's for home – or the nearest pub' was shouted out by the doorkeepers ... So ended the first local parliament and the last one ever called in this county. In after ages, there was a base imitation by means of Irresponsible grand juries, life-elected harbour commissioners, corporations, town commissioners, boards of guardians, county and district councils: but alas! The old house in Cregg is no more – not one stone stands on another of that fine building – 'Sic Transit'. (6 December 1899)

However, like all satire, Malley's humour was lost on many of his readers, and although the 'Comic History' elicited a huge response, much of it was negative. He was forced, as a result, to preface the sixth chapter of the work with a defiant riposte to the many criticisms readers had with the liberties he had taken:

Some people, who have education and are the embodiment of culture and conscientiousness, seem to have no more sense of humour than a soothing-iron. I am not writing for people possessing parched and acrid sensibilities who will not enjoy my historic revelations. Some people cannot appreciate the fact that I am writing a comic history! My fatuous frivolity may be a perversion of my talent, and I may be a literary debauchee, wallowing in my own degradation; and some of my readers – one here and one there – may want to raise my wandering feet onto the solid rock of literal fact. Now I contend when I make my readers indulge in hearty, wholesome laughter, I am sure to shake off loads of gloom and trouble. I may be a falsifier, a distorter of facts, a literary montbank (so to speak), but I contend that ideas, incongruously associated becoming ludicrous to the intellect, are blessed with the faculty of mirthfulness. (8 November 1899)

However, even if some people just did not get it, the 'Comic History' was perhaps the only prominent, consistent, indication of a lighter side to that newspaper under

McHugh. Although his reign at the *Sligo Champion*, as we have seen, was not notable for its lighter side, his permission of such a parody echoed O'Connor's argument that although newspapers may be partisan, they did not always have to be serious. It was, however, hardly a coincidence that Malley's tenure at the paper at the turn of the century also saw a number of other lighter features such as the 'Original Poetry' column begin their short lifespan (27 December 1899).

A Foot-Soldier for 'New Journalism'?

While Malley's work constituted a unique commentary on the idea of the journalist as popular historian, the question of whether it was indicative of the work of a 'new journalist' – lighter and more humorous than *Champion* readers would have been accustomed to – is more complex. Its status as a satirical, light-hearted piece may have imbued it with all the frivolity Matthew Arnold claimed was destructive about the 'new journalism', but it belonged to a tradition that significantly predated the work of Stead, O'Connor and those who followed. As early as 1844, Sligo readers were exposed to local satire by the *Cryptic*, although the brevity of its run – and the non-existence of a single issue in any archive – suggested that its infamy was such that few people in the town were sorry to see it out of business. This was a publication high on satire, in which a series of articles entitled 'Gallery of Distinguished Personages' held up to ridicule most of the town's leading politicians and public figures. The *Irish Booklover* described it as, 'a few pages in double column, poorly printed and its few photographs ... merely scurrilous gossip'.

One of the principal targets of the *Cryptic* was the editor of the *Sligo Champion*, E.H. Verdon – and in making an enemy of Verdon, the newspaper would trigger its decisive downfall. The proprietors were found guilty of promulgating 'a false, scandalous and malicious libel' in 1846 on Verdon, and sentenced to six months in prison, by which time the paper collapsed. However, a final testament to its impact appeared in the *Champion*, when Verdon celebrated 'crushing that immoral and obscene print which so long disgraced this Town. We pledge ourselves never to permit a similar publication to exist in our midst' (4 June 1846). Four decades later, Archdeacon Terence O'Rorke, the author of a two-column history of Sligo who was himself lampooned later by Malley in his 'Comic History', would give the same damning verdict on the *Cryptic*. He wrote that, 'this vile rag which traded in buffoonery and personalities was suppressed before the law ... but not before it had held up to ridicule and contempt many of the inhabitants of the town' (1889: 467).

However, its pretension at humour and apparent determination to offer a lighter alternative to the serious newspaper served to illustrate that this sentiment was not a novel one at the time when the term 'new journalism' was coming into vogue. Verdon found himself in an ironic reversal of roles four years later when he used the same type of ridicule to smite one of his commercial and political opponents – James Sedley of the *Sligo Chronicle*. This time it was Verdon's character assassination of Sedley that was the indiscretion, and again there was a certain amount of humour injected into the attack on the 'ultra-Orange rag and its editor'. The response of Sedley showed less than a keen sense of fun, however – he challenged Verdon to a duel. This confrontation actually came off at Maugheraboy just outside Sligo town in 1852, although neither Sedley nor Verdon were injured in the exchange of pistol fire (despite the rumour that Verdon used a poisoned bullet). Three years later,

Sedley even instituted libel proceedings against the Gillmor brothers – proprietors of the *Sligo Independent* – for the latter’s publication of a comedic ballad entitled ‘Anthony Crow’ that he claimed was an attack on not only himself, but also his brother Charles and his late father (McTernan, 2000: 529). Subsequently the ‘Comic History’, and a large collection of other ‘lighter touches’ came to permeate the newspapers of Sligo – the most effective of which was the cartoonist Alfred McHugh’s sketches in the *Sligo Star*.⁶

Thus, Malley’s lightening up of the *Sligo Champion* through satire was by no means unique. Indeed, his literary exploits also jibbed well with the likes of Patrick Smyth, editor of the *Western People*, who published a number of novels, the most enduring of which was *The Wild Rose of Lough Gill*, published by Gill and Sons in 1883. There was also Joel Whittaker, Malley’s predecessor as editor of the *Sligo Independent*, who published a play, *Name is Jones*, which was performed by the Sligo Dramatic Company in the Town Hall in 1879. Malley himself had previous experience in this area too, having written a number of tales and sketches in prose and verse throughout the 1870s in the *Sligo Independent*. Following a favourable response from readers, these were published as a collection entitled *The Garavogue Papers* (McTernan, 2000: 349–67).

It may thus be easier to associate Malley’s work, and the work of those outlined above, with a lighter side of journalism that was not necessarily new. This was in contrast to other, lighter initiatives newspapers in Sligo undertook subsequently. There was a growing recognition that accompanying this new type of journalism was a new type of reader. Those who preferred the older style still read their newspapers methodically from front to back, not being distracted by some headline or story that would scream interest. Of course, those who favoured the ‘new journalism’ read messily, and were distracted by pictures and alluring headlines. If they found a newspaper folded on the tram on the way home from work, they would read the first item they saw on that fold, and would not pay attention to the logical sequence of the newspaper (Dawson, 1921: 368–80). In order to grab the attention of those who read sloppily, then, it was necessary to make them feel more involved in the process of reading. Some of the Sligo journals favoured a more interactive approach to ensure reader interest.

Perhaps the most innovative example of this was provided by Michael Dowd’s *Sligo Star*, which printed a notice on 15 January 1902 of a competition open to all readers to determine who could point out the most typographical errors in the advertising

6 Alfred McHugh – no relation to P.A. McHugh – was actively recruited by the *Sligo Star* from the *Roscommon Herald* in 1900. While at the *Herald*, McHugh had a fractious relationship with the paper’s editor, Jasper Tully, who, like P.A. McHugh, was an Irish Party MP and believed the sole purpose of his newspaper was political propaganda. When Alfred McHugh refused an order that his cartoons promote Tully’s political agenda, an argument ensued in which Alfred was reported to have broken a window in the *Herald* office and, also, in the words of his new employer, the *Sligo Star*, to have ‘attempted with qualified success to inflict similar injuries on the cranium of the proprietor’. The result of ensuing legal proceedings was that Alfred McHugh was imprisoned for a month, after which time he joined the journalistic staff of the *Sligo Star*. Dowd wrote in his leader as he introduced McHugh as a member of the staff of the *Star*: ‘It will be remembered that on the occasion of his committal to prison, Mr McHugh was escorted to the Railway Station by an enthusiastic crowd representative of all classes in Boyle – a fact which shows that Mr Tully is not, after all, the hero among those who know him best, which his paper would lead people to understand it was.’ The cheerful way in which the *Star* reported this incident was no doubt due to the fact that the paper reputedly had a large circulation in north Roscommon, and particularly in Boyle, where it competed heavily with the *Roscommon Herald*.

columns. It was explicitly stated in the notice that the principal motivations were to boost sales and generate interest in the advertisements themselves. In 1918, too, the *Sligo Nationalist* included a gardening column (10 January), which also became a constant in the *Connachtman*⁷ under the column heading of 'The Farm and Garden' (12 May 1920). By expanding the editorial content to cater for such extra-curricular interests, it gave those interested a compelling reason to buy the paper, or at least ensured their continued custom. The same attempt to compel people to keep buying was indicated earlier by the *Sligo Times*, as from the outset Bob Smyllie promoted the chess column as an aspect of the paper that would give satisfaction to many of his readers. Not only would it entail a weekly problem for the reader to solve, but it would also discuss attitudes to chess and anecdotes from famous grandmaster matches. Serialising these, it was hoped, would lead to continued, rather than sporadic, interest (*Sligo Times*, 19 February 1909). When William Peebles took over the *Sligo Independent* in 1920, meanwhile, he showed considerable enterprise in this respect also. In addition to the 'humour column' (first appearing 27 March 1920), there also appeared in 1923 a 'Ladies column', by 'Kathleen', which provided articles on making good coffee (24 February) and tips on fashion (17 March) and housekeeping (6 April).

Malley, with all his literary prowess, could not match the populism of these initiatives, which were at least more in keeping with the commercial, reader-oriented ethic of 'new journalism'. But even these examples have their problems when it comes to establishing their definitive associations with 'new journalism'. Dowd's competition, for instance, was designed to re-educate readers on the old-fashioned precision tendency, by encouraging a closer reading of the contents. Bradshaw's primary motivation, meanwhile, in his *Connachtman*, was unashamedly political, something that would have put him at odds with O'Connor, who – although a political activist – advocated that politics should not subordinate everything else in a newspaper. Smyllie's chess column was indicative, meanwhile, of the haphazard way games were covered by newspapers, and even in the 1920s, Sligo's surviving newspapers were only beginning to cover sporting events with any regularity. Likewise, there was nothing particularly original about Peebles's humorous titbits, or his column catering to specifically female activities. Such a realisation illustrates the care which 'new journalism' requires. While Malley's work was light, satirical and politically ambivalent – to the point where the author could be termed an equal-opportunities offender – it was still imbued with the scholarly prose that had distinguished a number of satirical pieces in the Sligo papers before. Thus, like these other brief examples, the 'Comic History of Sligo' is instructive as an example of the difficulty which historians of Irish journalism encounter when called upon to discuss 'new journalism'.

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⁷ The *Sligo Nationalist* was closed in April 1920, and re-launched as the *Connachtman* on 5 May 1920 under the same editor, R.G. Bradshaw. See McTernan, 2000: 537.

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Newspaper sources

Pall Mall Gazette

Sligo Nationalist

Sligo Star

Sligo Times

The Connachtman

The Sligo Champion