# The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882

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How much can old newspapers tell us about what people thought in the past? Did the press reflect shared national perspectives on particular issues, and widely held beliefs and prejudices about other peoples, cultures and countries? How far did it act either to embody or to shape 'public opinion', and thus influence the formation of political positions and government policies? These are questions that many historians grapple with in the course of their work, and for which there are no easy answers. Profoundly different assumptions and approaches lead to widely varying conclusions. Studies of nineteenth-century British views of the Irish, as mediated through the press, offer a particularly striking illustration of the controversy that can result. A number of historians have, over the last thirty-five years, drawn on press comment and cartoon caricature as a means to explore British attitudes towards the Irish. De Nie's book is the latest, and most solidly grounded, contribution to this debate. While not uncontroversial in its arguments and approach, when placed in the context of previous work *The Eternal Paddy* helps us to see how different methods for dealing with newspaper sources might in fact complement each other, and together reveal a fuller picture.

Political historians who wish to use newspapers as a source face a number of problems, of which two are particularly significant. First, one must decide how best to work with and select from a seemingly inexhaustible body of material. Second, one needs to think about what these sources can reliably tell us about the past. Very often, the response is to opt for analysis of a limited (although often still ambitious) sample of newspapers, and then to contextualise the material so harvested by correlating press comment with other contributions to political debate. Comparisons and connections can be drawn between different newspapers, between newspapers and other printed primary sources and between newspapers on the one hand and private papers and public archival material on the other. In this way, press comment can be associated with particular positions within the wider sphere of political debate.

This approach has marked several attempts to use the press to gauge British opinion about Irish issues, notably D. George Boyce's *Englishmen and Irish Troubles: British Public Opinion and the Making of Irish Policy, 1918–22* and, more recently, Gary Peatling's *British Opinion and Irish Self-Government, 1865–1925: from Unionism to Liberal Commonwealth*

.(1) For both Boyce and Peatling, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century press primarily acted as a complement to other tools of political controversy. Newspapers and periodicals were a means by which wider debate could be shaped and led, and by which support could be generated for particular political positions. The emphasis in this mode of historical writing is on the specifics: on identifiable individuals and groups seeking newspaper outlets for their opinions; on the detailed and sometimes closely reasoned political arguments and positions adopted by contemporaries; and, very often, on the close links that developed between the world of journalism and the world of politics. Such accounts stress the importance of debates conducted along largely rational lines, involving contingent and shifting attitudes and arguments that meshed with the minutiae of party politics.

However, other historians have used the press as a source to address similar basic questions, but in quite different ways, emphasising instead the role of newspapers in reflecting and spreading generalised prejudices. In such accounts, newspapers do not provide an arena for high-minded political debate: rather, they deal in cultural stereotypes that hamper rational decision-making. Among historians of British attitudes towards the Irish, this approach is exemplified by L. Perry Curtis, Jr., in his *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature*. Curtis focuses on political cartoons about Irish issues, and the accompanying caricatures of the Irish, that were published in mid to late nineteenth-century British periodicals. He emphasises the 'gradual but unmistakable transformation of Paddy, the stereotypical Irish Celt of the mid-nineteenth century, from a drunken and relatively harmless peasant into a dangerous ape-man or simianized agitator'.(2) According to Curtis, Irishmen were not caricatured as apes during the Rising of 1798: rather, cartoon simianisation began in the 1840s, and became particularly prevalent as the violence of the Fenian campaigns of the 1860s brought the threat of social upheaval. Curtis argues that this shift reflected a growing sense of British superiority vis-à-vis the Irish, based on an increasingly racialised view of the latter that was supported by wider Victorian ideas about physiognomy, ethnology and Darwinian evolution.

Curtis's work has provoked controversy. Sheridan Gilley argued in an essay on 'English attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780–1900' (3) that stereotypes about 'Paddies' were as much a product of Irish views of themselves as of British prejudice. Moreover, Gilley claimed that such stereotypes were not essentially about race, as Curtis had argued, because most Britons did not regard the Irish as a race apart. For Gilley, British attitudes to the Irish were a complex mixture of the positive and the negative, and derived largely from shifting ideas about religion, class and political violence. Roy Foster endorsed these conclusions in an essay that was published in, and provided the main title for, his collection *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (1993). Foster argued that simianisation was but a passing phase in Punch caricatures of the Irish, and that British cartoonists drew upon a much wider range of images of Irish men and women than Curtis had suggested. Foster agreed with Gilley that British attitudes to the Irish were complex and shifting, reflecting not a sense of Irish racial difference, but rather a dislike of popery, peasants and political violence that was expressed in various ways at different times. Foster and Gilley stressed that British attitudes to the Irish could thus only be recovered by situating press comment in its specific, contemporary political context: 'historians have been right to treat Irish politics as political history.'(4)

This controversy clearly reflected opposed political preferences and, in particular, divergent views about contemporary Irish nationalism and Anglo-Irish relations. However, it also derived from different ideas about historical explanation and the relative importance of the general and the specific. Thus while Curtis, Gilley and Foster all used the periodical press as a source, they did so in distinct ways, in order to support quite different conclusions.

Michael de Nie's book, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882* is a significant new contribution to the debate. It differs from other studies in the breadth of primary material on which it is based: whereas previous work on British attitudes towards the Irish was rooted in a relatively thin sampling of the periodical press, de Nie has grounded his arguments in a remarkably extensive cross-section of British newspapers and periodicals. More than ninety metropolitan and provincial titles, published in England, Scotland and Wales, are included in the sample. This was made possible by a decision to focus on four shorter periods within the book's overall time-frame: 1798–1800 (the Rising and the Act of Union); 1845–52 (the Great Famine); 1867–70 (the Fenian disturbances and Irish terrorist activities in Britain, Irish church

disestablishment and Gladstone's Land Act); and 1879–82 (the rise of Parnell and the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Land War). Nevertheless, the sheer volume of newspaper material that has been examined in order to construct these case studies remains extremely impressive, to say the least. No previous study of British press opinion about Ireland and the Irish has rested upon such a wide base of primary research. Indeed, as we will see, the very size of de Nie's sample is intimately related to the arguments and conclusions that emerge in his book.

To some extent, de Nie seeks to occupy a middle ground in the debate over the nature of British attitudes towards the Irish. While emphasising the importance of stereotypes, he agrees with Gilley and Foster that British attitudes to Ireland were shaped in particular ways at particular times by contemporary crises and debates. Thus, for example, he argues that British press responses to 1798 were influenced by British ideas about revolutionary violence in France, as well as by British beliefs about the gullible and savage nature of the Irish. Similarly, while stressing the importance of Victorian thinking about race in shaping British attitudes, de Nie argues that we should also acknowledge the inexact nature of that body of thought. For de Nie, race was a Victorian 'metalanguage' that also encompassed those issues of social status, religion and political violence emphasised by Gilley and Foster.(5)

However, while thus at times mildly critical of aspects of Curtis's argument, in most respects de Nie is clearly on the side of the *Apes and Angels*. Crucially, he shares with Curtis the same general approach to the use of the press as a source. Admirably explicit about his methodology, de Nie questions how closely newspapers can be tied into the history of party politics. This reflects, perhaps, his experience of reading significant numbers of provincial papers, which generally maintained looser political affiliations than their metropolitan counterparts. While acknowledging that the British press never spoke with one voice, de Nie nevertheless downplays the significance of the differences between the approaches of various newspapers, and instead emphasises underlying similarities. He argues for the existence of 'a number of dominant trends, opinions, and beliefs that crossed or blurred partisan lines and collectively informed a "British" view of Ireland and the Irish people during the nineteenth century' (p. 28). Essentially, the press is viewed as an indicator of national opinion, revealing and entrenching widely held stereotypes. Following Curtis, de Nie argues that cartoons are particularly revealing, as humour provided an alibi that allowed the artist to express prejudices in their baldest forms.

Indeed, despite his attempts to occupy a middle ground, in some respects de Nie goes even further than Curtis in stressing the enduring nature of stereotypes. For while Curtis focussed on the simianised Paddy as a caricature with a finite historical lifespan, emerging during the 1840s and becoming increasingly rare by the 1890s, de Nie argues that certain stereotypes enjoyed greater longevity. Common to British reactions to events in Ireland from the Rising to the Land War was an emphasis on the Irish as ignorant, savage, uncivilised, superstitious, priest-ridden, lazy and land-hungry. At the same time however, British press commentators also often insisted on the essential loyalty of the mass of the Irish people. To resolve this contradiction, British writers looked for troublemakers, who could be blamed for leading a gullible people astray: rabble-rousers infected with French revolutionary ideology, drifting Irish-American Civil War veterans stirring up Fenianism and careerist Parnellites were all in turn blamed for fanning the flame of sedition. Such representations supported a desire to grant reforms that would address those Irish grievances perceived to be justified, cutting the ground from beneath the feet of the dissatisfied and allowing Irish loyalty to flourish. For de Nie, these attitudes remained relatively fixed from the 1790s to the 1880s, and possibly beyond: the 'eternal' of his title is matched by frequent use of words such as 'always' and 'forever'.

De Nie also argues that enduring stereotypes exerted a powerful influence over British policy towards Ireland. Against a backdrop of continued and largely static prejudice, de Nie claims that what did change during the nineteenth century was the degree of British confidence in Ireland's capacity for transformation. Indeed, according to de Nie, the very fact that British commentators could not perceive any alteration in the character of the Irish over time itself largely accounts for their growing disillusionment. For de Nie, the opinions expressed by the British press during the nineteenth century reflected a broader, abortive attempt to 'civilise' Ireland. This aspiration was most strongly expressed during the two great catastrophes of modern Irish history, the 1798 Rising and the Great Famine, but was gradually abandoned thereafter.

De Nie thus claims, for example, that British press opinion about the Famine was profoundly influenced by ideas about Irish incapacity. Arguments about the economic, political and moral causes of the crisis, while important, were essentially secondary to 'traditional hierarchical ideas about Irish and British identities based on racial, religious, and class contrasts' (p. 86). These convictions in turn bolstered British confidence in Anglicisation as a means to bring stability to Ireland: if the very Irishness of the Irish was the reason for their problems, then the remedy was to encourage the Irish to be more British. Ireland needed to become a country of industrious, well-fed farmers, free of peasant superstition and fecklessness and of grasping, wasteful landlords. However, in de Nie's opinion, the shocks of Fenianism and the Land War meant that, by the 1880s, all but the most Liberal of British papers had lost faith in the ability of the Irish to transform themselves. Instead, benevolent paternalism became the order of the day. Irish grievances could only be contained, not remedied. According to de Nie, this widely diffused sense of disappointment, particularly apparent in the press, inevitably had an impact upon the policy-making process. Home Rule was 'an admission of defeat, an acknowledgement that the Irish could never be British' (p. 275).

De Nie has re-ignited an old debate, offering strong arguments that engage with some of the big issues in nineteenth-century Irish history. For de Nie, nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals reveal generalised prejudices and stereotypes that permeated British thinking about the Irish, and that acted to mould British responses to events in Ireland, and thus shape British policy-making. As was hinted at above, these conclusions are closely related to de Nie's approach to the use of newspapers as a historical source. In order to make sense of such a huge and diverse sample of press comment, bold generalisations are necessary. However, the result is perhaps a tendency to exaggerate the explanatory power of prejudice and stereotypes. As noted above, de Nie does acknowledge that representations of the Irish in the British press were also influenced by other, more specific and varied factors. Indeed, when he discusses British press reactions to incidents such as the Manchester and Clerkenwell atrocities, or to Gladstone's attempts to redress Irish grievances through limited reform, he implicitly reduces his emphasis on stereotypes and prejudice. Despite making such concessions, de Nie seldom explores quite how the specific related to the general: how and why, and in what circumstances, prejudice gave way to more considered comment. It could be argued that this absence is a function of his methodology.

De Nie stresses that *The Eternal Paddy* is not a newspaper history, and that it approaches newspapers primarily as a 'cultural product' (p. 28). This reflects his decision to draw evidence almost exclusively from the printed pages of newspapers and periodicals, and allows him to provide a clear and often powerful framework of analysis. De Nie paints with a broad brush, and in doing so reveals British stereotypes about and prejudices against the Irish that historians certainly need to take into account. However, such an approach also acts to obscure important factors that complicated newspaper responses to particular issues. It is certainly valid to see newspaper comment as a 'cultural product', but at the same time we cannot fully understand the product unless we consider the circumstances under which production took place.

Given the range and scope of de Nie's enquiry, it would probably be unfair to expect him to have examined 'supply-side' factors in detail. However, if we do wish to gauge the exact significance of stereotypes, and to understand how they related to more specific responses to Irish issues, then we need to undertake this more intricate work as well. We must consider, for example, quite how coverage of Irish affairs varied between different types of newspaper over time. Until the abolition of 'taxes on knowledge' around the middle of the nineteenth century, there flourished in Britain a vibrant, radical unstamped press. With the repeal of stamp

duties and other levies on newspapers, and the rise of a new commercialised press, radicalism declined, but new divisions emerged as newspapers became linked more closely to the main political parties. De Nie mentions this transformation, but does not explore its ramifications in any detail. Did the existence and subsequent stilling of radical voices have any impact on British press coverage of Ireland? Did the increasingly partisan nature of the late-nineteenth-century press influence attitudes towards events in Ireland?

Other issues also need to be explored if we wish to understand the balance between stereotyping and more informed treatment of Irish affairs in the British press. Questions of authorship and of the nature of different modes of journalistic writing are particularly important. We might find, for example, that editorials (on which de Nie seems to rely quite heavily) provide us with particularly pungent, but also somewhat misleading, examples of prejudice. Nineteenth-century editorial writers were frequently non-specialists, who had access to limited background information, and who were often working to tight deadlines: they may have relied on stereotypes to a much greater extent than did those journalists whose job it was to provide detailed reports on Irish affairs. Provincial papers, lacking specialised editorial staff or Irish correspondents, may have been particularly prone to prejudice. Studies of individual newspapers, examining the variations between different types of news and comment, and relating these differences to issues of authorship and journalistic approach, would help us to understand the circumstances in which writers relied on prejudice, and the factors that encouraged a more informed position. It would be interesting to know for example whether W. H. Russell's reports of 1843 on O'Connell's repeal agitation provided a more complex picture than the editorial comment otherwise published by his newspaper, *The Times*.

The debate over British attitudes towards the Irish provides a good example of how, when using the press as a source, the nature of the sample we adopt, and the steps we take to contextualise it, together exert a powerful influence over our arguments. In the case of *The Eternal Paddy*, the scale of de Nie's sample of press comment, and his decision not to examine it in relation to other types of source material, means that the significance of stereotypes at times seems overstated. Nevertheless, it would be impossible now to argue that prejudice was not a significant feature of British press coverage of Irish issues, and de Nie provides some excellent examples of how this manifested itself. Historians now need to look more closely at the balance between stereotyping and considered comment, by undertaking a range of detailed and highly contextualised studies, exploring the specifics of ownership and authorship, and the provenance of different types of news and comment about Ireland. Crucially, as de Nie acknowledges, they also need to move on from the unhelpful binary oppositions of previous historiographical controversy. To appreciate how the press influenced British policy-making on Irish issues, which seems to be the ultimate aim of the exercise, we need to see the politically-focused approaches of Gilley and Foster on one hand, and the more culturally-oriented methods of Curtis and de Nie on the other, as offering complementary rather than conflicting accounts.

# Notes

1. D. George Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles: British Public Opinion and the Making of Irish Policy, 1918–22* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972); Gary Peatling, *British Opinion and Irish Self-Government, 1865–1925: from Unionism to Liberal Commonwealth* (Dublin, 2001).Back to (1)
2. L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot, 1971), p. vii.Back to (2)
3. Published in *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*, ed. Colin Holmes (1978).Back to (3)
4. Sheridan Gilley, 'English attitudes to the Irish', p. 97.Back to (4)
5. A similar point was made by Curtis in a revised edition of *Apes and Angels* published in 1997.Back to (5)

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