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Big causes and small nations: Michael Sayers, writing, fascism, communism and Jewish-Irishness

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ABSTRACT

This article begins by examining a series of 1944 articles by Michael Sayers published in the New York newspaper *PM* and the official response denying the existence of anti-Semitism in Ireland they prompted. The content of the articles and the character of the official response to them are evaluated and the career of their author is then outlined. A Dublin-born Jewish writer, Sayers became politically active in the USA during the 1940s and, having been “blacklisted” as the Cold War intensified, returned to Europe to continue working mainly as a pseudonymous writer of television scripts. He was eventually able to return to New York where he died in 2010 aged 98. While “blacklisted” during the 1950s Sayers had a play staged under his real name in Dublin without controversy despite the repeated attacks being made in the city at that time on authors and actors whose alleged left-wing leanings rendered them objectionable to Catholic vigilantes. The paper concludes with an examination of this episode.

KEYWORDS

Anti-fascism; Antisemitism;
World War II; Cold War;
anti-communist blacklisting

Introduction

Philip Roth’s 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* imagines a USA in which Franklin Roosevelt has lost the 1940 presidential election to Charles Lindbergh, the renowned aviation pioneer turned “America First” advocate. Strong Roosevelt supporters, the Jewish residents of the Weequahic neighbourhood of Newark, New Jersey, are deeply dismayed by this turn of events but uncertain as to what it portends. Is Lindbergh intent on building a unified nation with a foreign policy that is shaped by its own best interests – which he views as being distinct from those of the British Empire and of international Jewry – or is he heading down the road of racial persecution pursued by the Axis Powers he is reaching accommodations with? For his part, the father of the novel’s child narrator is in no doubt about the evil direction in which his country is heading and constantly draws confirmation for this judgement from a trusted radio commentator, Walter Winchell, and from his chosen newspaper – “when he walked about the house now a copy of *PM* was constantly in his hands, either rolled up like a weapon – as though he were preparing, if called upon, to go to war himself – or turned back to a page where there was something he wanted to read aloud to my mother”.¹

PM is not a novelist's invention but a remarkable tabloid whose eight year lifetime began in June 1940 across the Hudson from Newark in New York City. According to its historian, Paul Milkman, *PM* was "an enormous financial failure" whose losses were borne mainly by one very wealthy backer – Marshall Field III who was the heir to a vast department store fortune. Yet it could at the same time claim credit for having brought about "scores of innovations in newspaper publishing". These included the way in which photography was featured; use of colour, aesthetically pleasing layouts, creative use of drawn art and graphics; the inclusion of consumer news; the inclusion of radio programming information and a refusal to carry advertising through most of its history. *PM* was a newspaper that numbered both the child-rearing guru Dr Spock and the creator of *The Cat in the Hat*, Dr Seuss, among its contributors and its innovative character owed much to Ralph Ingersoll, who had previously worked on the Henry Luce magazine empire's *Fortune* and *Life* titles. Politically *PM* was "a fighting liberal crusader" supporting US entry into a war to defeat fascism and advocating the rights of trade unionists, Jews and blacks.² Amidst a generally hostile press, the paper was an ardent supporter of Roosevelt, a figure it tended to idealise because, as Milkman notes, while the President was "capable of militant rhetoric ... he was as skilful in maintaining alliances with old-style political bosses in Democratic urban and southern power bases".³

The Plot Against America has no Irish-American characters but the memory the narrator's mother has of growing up Jewish in a New Jersey town "dominated by the Irish working class and their politicians and the tightly knit parish life that revolved around the town's many churches" plays an important role in her husband's decision to pass up a work promotion that would mean moving out of the family's overwhelmingly Jewish Newark neighbourhood.⁴ The only reference to the Irish in Milkman's history of *PM* is made in relation to the ambivalent position that Jews occupied in 1940s New York – "Young Christian Front hoodlums in the German, Irish and Italian communities were fond of Jew-bashing: the genteel Protestant establishment maintained its white Christian exclusivity with written and unwritten quotas on jobs, housing and educational opportunities".⁵ Neither the novelist nor the historian refers to Ireland's wartime neutrality although *PM*'s interventions on this issue have registered in Irish treatments of the period. For example, T. Ryle Dwyer cites *PM* in relation to charges of distortion, misrepresentation and rumour mongering levelled broadly against the American press and specifically refers to "a particularly inflammatory series of articles" *PM* published in March 1944.⁶ These articles prompted a strong Irish official response which, along with part of *PM*'s rejoinder, has been quoted by Dermot Keogh.⁷ However, the breadth of the context within which Keogh presents this material does not accommodate its full consideration. This paper revisits *PM*'s wartime exchange with Irish officialdom in order to provide an account of greater depth.

Cables between New York and Dublin

On 14 March 1944 the Irish Consul General in New York, Leo McCauley, sent three cables to the Department of External Affairs in Dublin. The first read:

Rabid debate on Irish developments taking place Saturday. One of the speakers against Ireland is Michael Sayers described as Irish journalist. Understand that he is not of Irish stock

and that father was an Army contractor in Dublin. Please cable details regarding son immediately, including original name and nationality of father.

According to the second:

"P.M." prints the first of a series of four articles by Michael Sayers, described as an Irish journalist. His article is captioned "Truth about Nazi espionage in Eire – Irish terrorists work directly under Hitler's orders". It states that Axis espionage has flourished on Irish soil since the first days of the war and De Valera knows it. The article describes the German Legation as having spy courier system working across border, mentions Francis Stuart as broadcasting Nazi propaganda from Berlin, his wife's arrest, and arrest of Henry Lunberg with text of despatch found on him addressed to Director of Intelligence, Northern Command, enquiring strength British and American forces. It also gives details of Hayes incidents and activities of Sean Russell.

While the third stated:

"P.M." announces next three articles by Sayers will deal with 'rise of Anti-Semitic Fifth Column in Eire'. Suggest you obtain urgently for publication here statement from Jewish leader and community in Ireland.

The first response from Dublin came on 16 March when a cable provided sketchy details on Sayers and his background – "Father is Jew born in Russia. Lived for some years in Dublin now in London. Michael born Dublin, was in T.C.D. 1937, then went to England". On the following day, St. Patrick's Day, a much longer cable containing statements from the Jewish Representative Council and from Fianna Fail T.D. Robert Briscoe was sent to New York. Over the names of 14 signatories, the Council statement read:

The Jewish Representative Council of Eire repudiate as false irresponsible and mischievous any suggestion that the government of this country is anti-Semitic or that there is any organised anti-Semitic movement in Eire. The Jewish community live and have always lived on terms of closest friendship with their fellow Irish citizens. Freedom to practice their religion is specifically guaranteed in the Irish Constitution. No Irish Government has ever discriminated between Jew and Non-Jew.

That of Robert Briscoe read:

As a member of the Irish parliament and as a practicing adherent of the Jewish faith who has represented for seventeen years a Dublin constituency ninety seven per cent Roman Catholic I deny emphatically that the people or the present or any Government of Ireland are or have ever been anti-Semitic. This statement is confirmed by the prompt repudiation of the calumny by the Jewish Representative Council of Eire composed of distinguished Irish citizens representing the entire Jewish community of Eire. I should like to add that the Jewish community in Eire are taking their full share in the Defence and auxiliary Defence Forces of the country and that they wholeheartedly support the Government's policy of neutrality.

These statements were published in a number of New York Irish or Catholic papers and also, on 25 March, by *PM* which, according to the Consul General, responded to them in the following terms:

P.M. repudiates as false, irresponsible and mischievous any suggestion that it imputed official anti-Semitic bias to the De Valera Government but P.M. repudiates as false, irresponsible and mischievous any denial that there is an organised anti-Semitic movement in Eire. There is, in spite of the fact – as P.M. pointedly observed – that anti –

Semitism never existed in Ireland until the Nazis found a few accomplices there. What P.M.'s article said – and what cannot be contradicted – is that the Germans have had some success in spreading the virus of anti-Semitism in Ireland with the help of such elements as General O'Duffy's Irish Fascist Party which has adopted a Nazi-inspired "Jewish peril" line and of Fr. Denis Fahey, author of anti-Semitic tracts taken partly from Nazi propaganda. Fahey and his Christocrats have had the support of Charles G. Coughlin. P.M. did not say that the Dail (Eire's Parliament) was anti-Semitic, but it did say, because it is a fact, that the Dail has its Rankin element.

A final line in the cable conveying this information to the Department of External Affairs in Dublin reads: "Irish Loan sold New York Exchange today at 99% unchanged".⁸ A postscript to the affair was added when a 14 September 1944 letter to Lennox Robinson of the Abbey Theatre from Patrick Mahony on Prince George Hotel, New York notepaper passed through the Irish postal censorship. This begins by asking Robinson about plays or stories that might be sent over for sale to the Hollywood film industry – "I can get them read at once by people like Schenk and other Yids out there". The letter then continues:

Do you happen to be in touch with Iseult Gonne? If so you might tell her that she has an open and shut case for libel against a nasty rag called P.M. in this city (165 Duane St.) They claimed that she had been jailed for pro-Nazi machinations and as I understand she was merely reprimanded for a very minor breach in defense regulations. This was stated in the work of an Irish-Jew called Michael Sayers whom you may know and whose work is always replete with false assertions. The date of the piece was 14 March 1944. I think she could get at least fifty thousand damages if she cares to press the case and I think she should. It is quite easy to invoke the foreign court procedure and any lawyer would take it on a contingency fee.⁹

On 9 November Colonel Dan Bryan, head of G2 (Army Intelligence) sent a copy of this letter to Joseph Walshe, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs commenting that "Sayers is a gentlemen who is in our black books and though I hold no brief for Iseult Stuart I would not be opposed to giving her a helping hand in any action she may consider taking against Sayers". A handwritten postscript adds that "he is the Jew that was syndicating anti-Irish articles re Espionage in Ireland during the US note crisis. His father would appear to be in London and to be a friend of Deputy Briscoe".¹⁰

The Department of External Affairs file containing the material quoted above is entitled "Allegation by US Journal 'PM' Re 'Organised Anti-Semitic' Movement in Ireland (Michael Sayers) 1944" but the contents of the file range more widely in subject matter and time. The earliest item again involves wartime postal censorship and the correspondence of another Irish literary figure, Monk Gibbon. The letter copied in this case was a reply he had written on 29 February 1944 to an inquiry from the Jewish Defence Committee in London. Here he concludes that "I think the very most that could be said – if that even – is that they [the Jews] are vaguely unpopular but there is absolutely no general attitude of intolerance towards them". There had been "some talk about a pamphlet 18 months or so ago" but he had not seen it and could provide no information about it apart from the impression that it did not "make a very great stir".¹¹

Teaching in a school in Bray, Gibbon was not perhaps the best placed of informants. Colonel Bryan of G2 had a superior vantage point and in January 1945 in another letter in the file with no connection to the Sayers articles in *PM*, he observed to Joseph Walshe that "writing with due recognition that the Jewish problem is a very thorny and contentious one and that accusations of Anti-Semitism are easily aroused, I wish to state that the extent to

which Dublin is becoming what may be described as Jew-conscious is frequently coming to the notice of this Branch".¹² An influx of Jews would, he predicts, follow any relaxation of the control on aliens entering Ireland. When the war ended De Valera sought to initiate a "positive and liberal" policy on the admission of refugees but the agencies exercising day-to-day control over entry frustrated this by adhering to existing highly restrictive practices.¹³ Walshe himself was to provide the striking testimony regarding the prevalence of anti-Semitic attitudes in Ireland when, having given up the position of Department Secretary to become Irish Ambassador to the Holy See, he reported from Rome in October 1946 on his meetings with "a large number of Irish priests and nuns visiting Rome for the purpose of their Orders, in most cases to elect a new Superior General":

All of them without exception spoke in terms of the highest praise of the Taoiseach and the Government and of the manner in which difficulties were being surmounted and real progress achieved ... Speaking of the difficulties facing the Government, they were unanimous in thinking that something ought to be done to prevent the jews buying property and starting or acquiring businesses in Ireland. There was a general conviction that the jewish influence is in the last analysis anti-christian and anti-national and consequently detrimental to the revival of an Irish cultural and religious civilisation. Some of them say that jewish materialism encourages communism (not an unusual view here).

Walshe was sure "that the Taoiseach would wish me to pass on these views of Irish men and women holding the highest position in their respective orders" but his successor as Department Secretary, Frederick Boland, decided that the letter should not be shown to De Valera.¹⁴

Clashing commitments

Ralph Ingersoll encapsulated *PM's* identity in the phrase "we are against people who push other people around".¹⁵ According to Paul Milkman "on the great issues of the day the paper was remarkably consistent, maintaining an impassioned antifascist, prolabor, left-liberal New Deal outlook".¹⁶ When the USA became a belligerent in late 1941 *PM* did not pull its punches in deference to a national war effort it strongly supported. For example, the paper extensively covered a serious outbreak of white-on-black violence in Detroit in 1943 which was exploited for propaganda purposes by Japanese radio. Nine pages of Detroit pictures were printed in *PM*, the complicity of the local police was exposed and the actions of politicians and government agencies strongly criticised.¹⁷

A rather different outlook encapsulation was provided by Joseph Walshe in a diplomatic cable sent from Dublin to Ottawa in January 1941 – "small nations like Ireland do not and cannot assume role of defenders of just causes except their own".¹⁸ For the state Walshe served an all-pervasive system of emergency censorship became "neutrality's backbone":

On the one level, it operated as an internal security mechanism in the traditional sense, giving the authorities an important informative and preventative weapon in the maintenance of political, military and economic security, supplementing the intelligence work of G2 (which carried out its own covert censorship activities). At the same time it was central to the public presentation of impartiality by denying belligerents "due cause" or domestic partisans any excuse or encouragement to create trouble for the state or its policy; the aim was to "keep the temperature down", both internally and between Ireland and the belligerents. A linked objective was the unity of the population by the suppression of anything that might prove divisive or

present a threat to public order. War news was “neutralised” (including suppression of reports of the concentration camps); newsreels were banned; children’s games were seized; the expressions of opinions on the war, neutrality and much else of vital importance, in both public media and private communications, was disallowed.¹⁹

As we have seen, Michael Sayers’ articles in *PM* were assailed both at the time and later as being “replete with false assertions”, “anti-Irish” and “inflammatory”. Yet, as synthesised in the New York Consul General’s cable, the one dealing with espionage was hardly factually inaccurate. Francis Stuart and other Irish people were making German radio broadcasts.²⁰ Stuart’s wife Iseult (the daughter of Maud Gonne) was tried on a charge of harbouring a person unknown who threatened the security of the state in July 1940. Henry Lundborg, a restaurant car attendant on the Great Northern Railway between Dublin and Belfast, was in possession of letters indicating that the clandestine Irish Republican Army (IRA) was engaged in gathering information on Allied forces within Northern Ireland when he was arrested in Belfast in February 1942.²¹ The IRA’s Chief of Staff when it launched a bombing campaign in Britain early in 1939, Sean Russell was secretly transported from the USA to Germany in April 1940 and later in the same year died on board a U-boat that was to have landed him in Ireland. The successor to Russell as IRA Chief of Staff, Stephen Hayes, was suspected by some of his comrades of being a traitor. In June 1941 these men abducted him and extracted a “confession”, parts of which were circulated by the IRA after Hayes managed to escape from its custody into that of the Gardai. This document contained, among other things, details of contacts that had taken place between Irish republicans and German military intelligence agents.²² Regarding Sayers’ broader claim that the German Legation had a “spy courier system working across border”, Eunan O’Halpin has recently offered a corrective to the widespread view that German legation played no significant intelligence role, concluding on the basis of recently released files that the German minister in Dublin, Eduard Hempel, had “consistently passed on as much war information as could be obtained incidentally, had encouraged pro-Nazi fringe groups, had intrigued with a senior Irish army officer, had first denied possession of a secret transmitter and had then broken undertakings to the Irish not to operate it again, and had indirectly assisted German agents sent to Ireland”.²³

In relation to the existence of an organised anti-Semitic movement in Ireland, *PM*’s charges were more of an understatement than an overstatement. Neither *PM*’s concession that there was no “official anti-Semitic bias” in Ireland nor the Jewish Representative Council statement that “no Irish Government has ever discriminated between Jew and Non-Jew” tally with what is now known about the parameters within which Irish immigration policy operated before and after the war.²⁴ Perhaps understandable in a wartime context, *PM*’s claim that “anti-Semitism never existed in Ireland until the Nazis found a few accomplices there” does not stand up to scrutiny and is a hindrance to proper historical understanding.²⁵

What then of the three elements indicted for helping the Germans to spread the virus of anti-Semitism in Ireland? Eoin O’Duffy’s biographer concludes that “he was an unprincipled opportunist rather than a dedicated anti-Semite” but that “the more anti-Semitism dominated international fascism the more this was reflected by his rhetoric”.²⁶ By 1944 O’Duffy was a spent force politically and, while in the war years there was

certainly a (closely monitored) “pro-Axis underground”,²⁷ there was no Irish Fascist Party. During these years O’Duffy, who died in November 1944, mixed caution with intrigue – “a Quisling in waiting, while being careful to deny the authorities a reason to intern him (the harsh environment of the Curragh camp being no place for an ailing alcoholic)”.²⁸

Fr. Denis Fahey, a professor at the Holy Ghost order’s Kimmage Manor seminary, was a prolific author of anti-Semitic books although this aspect of his work derives from an older right-wing Catholic tendency to amalgamate Protestantism, Liberalism, Freemasonry, Socialism, Communism and Judaism into a single force bent on the destruction of the church rather than from Nazism. The connection that *PM* noted between Fahey and Fr. Charles Coughlin, a Detroit-based priest whose radio programme built up a large audience across the USA from the late 1920s, was later to be explored in depth by Marie Christine Athans.²⁹ Coughlin had supported Roosevelt in the 1932 presidential election but in 1936 he opposed the President and backed a third party candidate who polled poorly. In opposition to Roosevelt he launched the National Union for Social Justice and, as anti-Semitism came to the fore in his broadcasts and writings at the end of the 1930s, he inspired the emergence of a Christian Front movement. By then Coughlin was making frequent reference to Fahey’s works to support the claims he made about Jews and the two priests then began a correspondence that continued up to Fahey’s death in 1954. Rather than submit to editorial controls instituted by a new industry self-regulation code, Coughlin withdrew from radio broadcasting in 1940.³⁰ In the press *Social Justice* continued to air his views until the entry of the USA into the World War led to its suppression in 1942. From then until his death in 1979, Coughlin was “silenced” by his ecclesiastical superiors but, amidst an extensive “brown scare” targeting isolationist or pro-Axis elements in the USA, he escaped prosecution by the state authorities.³¹ *PM* claimed credit for the speed with which moves to suppress Coughlin’s propaganda were instituted after the entry of the USA into the war and the paper also led the way in exposing the extensive violence against Jews in Boston and New York for which mainly Irish-American adherents of the Christian Front continued to be responsible throughout the war years.³²

A feature of US commentaries on Fr. Coughlin and his followers both before and after US entry into the war was the dubious claim that the IRA on both sides of the Atlantic was under his influence. An American Council on Public Affairs pamphlet in 1940 interwove the alleged use of IRA bomb-making techniques by New York Christian Front members arrested on conspiracy charges and the detention in London of a suspected IRA bomber allegedly identified through an intercepted communication to Christian Front headquarters in New York from the Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin to present “Berlin-Dublin-New York” as “international seats of infection for a festering boil on the neck of the nation”.³³ In 1943 an article in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* claimed that “to Fr. Coughlin look for intellectual guidance the Irish Republican Army, the Clan-na-Gael and similar Irish groups in this country and even in Eire”. Supporting the “even in Eire” claim was a footnote that referenced a Michael Sayers piece entitled “Swastika over the Shamrock?” published in *The Hour* in July 1939.³⁴

What *PM* termed a “Rankin element” was named after a Mississippi congressman notorious for his racial supremacist and anti-Semitic statements. The members of the Dail who fitted this description were limited in number due to the failure of the parties spawned by the pro-Axis underground – Ailtiù na hAisèirghe (Architects of the

Resurrection) and People's National Party – either to contest elections or to get any candidates elected to positions higher than that of local councillor. The label best applied to Oliver J. Flanagan who was elected as a Monetary Reform Party candidate in the 1943 general election and denounced Jews in his maiden Dail speech. Flanagan was influenced by, and corresponded with, Fr. Fahey.³⁵ To Flanagan might be added Clann na Talmhan, a small farmer protest party that won about 10 per cent of the vote in both the 1943 and 1944 general elections. But Jews were only one among many targets of the Clann's bilious rhetoric: as Eunan O'Halpin observes, while "it adopted some lines of argument which had Nazi resonances ... it was equally hostile to metropolitan Ireland, to civil servants, to taxation, and to all non-rural public expenditure".³⁶

What particularly exercised the Dublin authorities about the Sayers articles in *PM* was probably not their content but the timing of their appearance in the midst of the American Note Crisis. Presented on 21 February 1944 in the name of Secretary of State Cordell Hull, this Note requested that "the Irish Government take appropriate steps for the recall of the German and Japanese representatives in Ireland ... whose presence in Ireland must inevitably be regarded as constituting a danger to the lives of Allied soldiers and the success of Allied military operations". Refusing to comply, the Irish government in early March published the terms of the Note and placed their defence forces on high alert in anticipation of a possible Allied incursion. In Britain and the USA disclosure of the diplomatic exchange prompted a fresh wave of press attacks on the Irish neutrality policy of which the mid-March Sayers articles in *PM* effectively formed a part and to which – in the British cases – the Irish press censor responded punitively in some instances.³⁷

By November 1944 the tensions and restrictions of that year's Spring had eased significantly but perhaps it is not surprising that Colonel Bryan of G2 should still have Michael Sayers in "our black books". Yet his suggestion that an official "helping hand" might be given to a libel action against *PM* by Iseult Stuart remains extraordinary. Across the Atlantic, Patrick Mahony might believe that Iseult Stuart's actions constituted a very "minor breach in defense regulations" but Colonel Bryan would have known that when Herman Goertz, a German agent who landed by parachute in May 1940, made his way to Stuart's home in Wicklow his presence was not disclosed to the Irish authorities. Instead he was sheltered, provided with fresh clothes and a senior IRA figure, James O'Donovan, was contacted to collect him. A police raid on a Dublin "safe house" in which the IRA had placed him failed to capture Goertz but it did provide evidence that a German spy was at large and that he had been assisted since his arrival by Mrs. Stuart. This set in train her detention, trial and acquittal ("despite" – according to Mark Hull – "her clear guilt").³⁸ Scholars remain divided as to whether Iseult Stuart was an apolitical person in this instance haplessly thrust into a compromising position by the action of her absent (in Berlin) and estranged husband, Francis, or someone with more than social connections through the Gonne McBride clan with German Minister Eduard Hempel. As she was not interned by authorities with no compunction about applying this power to women suspected of subversion, it may be inferred that the government of the day leaned towards the former view. That a libel action she might bring in a wartime US court could be regarded in Ireland as having some prospect of success indicates the gulf between prevailing attitudes in the two countries at the time.

The death of PM and the emergence of Fiat

The end of the war was fairly quickly followed by *PM's* demise. Although changes of ownership and name would postpone the end for a time, Milkman points to election day in November 1946 as the crucial date upon which the paper abandoned its policy of not accepting advertising just as the Republicans were taking control of both houses of Congress – “the dream of the independent, liberal paper died on precisely the day Americans forswore liberalism (and banished antifascism forever).”³⁹ In Ireland the termination of the wartime press censorship brought the end of a blanket policy aiming to “keep the temperature down” which had suppressed anti-Semitic publications. By the Summer of 1946, prompted by the Department of Industry and Commerce which wanted to know how it was obtaining severely rationed newsprint, a new paper was being investigated by the Gardai who found it “extremely difficult to get exact information of the personnel of the group responsible for issue of ‘Fiat’”.⁴⁰ By October 1948 Frederick Boland in External Affairs was sending Colonel Bryan of G2 a copy and asking “have you any idea who is behind this periodical?” – “you will notice that it attacks the Marshall Plan describing it as an instrument of ‘the Judaeo-Masonic forces of the Western Hemisphere’ but that, on the other hand, it begins with an excerpt from a book by the Reverend Denis Fahey, C.S.Sp.”. In his reply, Colonel Bryan describes Fiat as being “issued by a Study Group of current social affairs which operates under the auspices of the Holy Ghost Fathers”:

Personally I feel that the driving force behind this activity is Father Fahey. He has written a book at some period on the influence of the Jews on World Affairs ... During the last war Father Fahey was very perturbed because important Nazi propagandists used some of his writings as propaganda against the Jews for their own purposes. He probably does not want somewhat similar use to be made by the Communists of “Fiat”⁴¹

By his own account, contained in letters he sent to Archbishop McQuaid of Dublin in November 1947, Fr. Fahey was publishing new – *The Tragedy of James Connolly* – or revised – *The Rulers of Russia and The Russian Farmers* – material with the aim of counteracting Communist propaganda. He was also reviving his efforts to bring out a work which had failed to get through the ecclesiastical censorship process in several Irish dioceses. To *The Kingship of Christ and the Conversion of the Jewish Nation*⁴² “I want to add on two or three chapters ... and to offer it to a friendly publisher in England”. This book would assert the validity of Fahey’s opposition to what he termed Jewish Naturalism in the face of a general post-Nazi reaction against anti-Semitism:

For a good many years, I have seen that a number of Catholic writers are making the mistake of not asserting the integral Rights of Our Lord and are at the same time accepting the Jewish interpretation of Anti-Semitism, namely any form of opposition to the Jewish nation. That is leading to deplorable results. I saw too, in the early years of the war, that the plan was to work up propaganda about the excesses of racial hatred in Germany and to use the feeling thus generated to crush any and every form of opposition to the preparations for the natural messias. That plan is being pushed forward. I do not know if Your Grace has seen that a priest’s Passion Sermon was banned in American-occupied Germany as Anti-Semitic. The item did not appear in the Irish newspapers. You may not have seen either that the Commission for the de-nazification of Germany condemned all the members of the cast of the Oberammergau Passion Play except Pontius Pilate and Judas. I have read over the text of one of the Bills against Anti-Semitism, introduced in the United States. Its terms

could be extended to suppress Holy Week, especially Good Friday, and even the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I want to point out these dangers and others, and I shall be grateful if you will enable me to lift my head again and continue my work for Christ the King. (Emphasis in original)⁴³

By the end of the 1940s Fr. Fahey's study group had emerged into the open as Maria Duce, a movement focussed mainly on changing the Irish Constitution's religious provisions to acknowledge the Catholic Church as the "one true church" and carrying out aggressive "anti-communist" picketing of cinemas and theatres. This was, in the words of a 1952 Department of External Affairs minute, "an energetic, rather intolerant organisation tinged with anti-Semitism".⁴⁴ Left to their own devices by the state and at first indulged but later isolated by the church authorities, Father Fahey's followers sustained an anti-Semitic presence in the Irish press and on the Irish streets into the early 1960s.

Michael Sayers, "the Jew that was syndicating Anti-Irish articles", before and after 1944

What then of Michael Sayers? Happily, on his death in 2010 at the age of 98, newspaper obituarists were able to go well beyond the scant details supplied in 1944 to Ireland's Consul General in New York. Born in Dublin in 1911, Michael had, according to his son Sean, "vivid childhood memories of fugitives being hidden in the house and of childhood raids". Bureau of Military History witness statements contain references to his businessman father's republican links that include the presence of Michael Collins in the family's home at a time when there was a price of £10,000 on his head as well as Philip Sayers driving Arthur Griffith and others to Longford in his car during a vital 1917 by-election campaign.⁴⁵ Michael was educated in England at Cheltenham College and began studying law but in 1930 told T.S. Eliot, to whom he had sent his poems, that "my father can no longer afford to keep me". He contemplated emigration to South Africa but instead, with Eliot's assistance, embarked on a London literary career, publishing short stories, contributing to Eliot's *Criterion* magazine and to the *New English Weekly* and for a time sharing a flat with other aspiring writers including George Orwell.⁴⁶ By the end of the 1930s his artistic focus was changing, and his 1937 Trinity College Dublin sojourn appears to have been a brief one preceding his departure for New York to work in the theatre.

To T.S. Eliot in 1931 Sayers had written that "I am temperamentally and intellectually averse to politics" but, as the cover flap of a 1942 book he co-authored informed readers, he "gave up his position as Director of Norman Bel Geddes' Theatrical Department to devote himself to investigating and writing about the Axis fifth column. The first comprehensive exposes of Axis intrigue in France, England and Ireland to be published in the United States were written by Sayers who travelled widely in Europe and had the opportunity to study at first hand the work of the Axis fifth column there in the years prior to the outbreak of World War II".⁴⁷ In New York the main initial outlet for Sayers' journalism was the weekly magazine *Friday* which has been described as "an anti-fascist, pro-labor version of *Life*".⁴⁸ It was similar to the daily *PM* not only in its political outlook but also as an innovative, high quality publication. One critic wrote that "it is a smooth-coat journal, does an excellent two-color job and is full of expensive art

layouts" before "'exposing' it and *PM* as the contributions of 'millionaire playboys' ... to 'American communism'".⁴⁹ But the political milieu both belonged to embraced both Communists and a non-Communist Left. As Milkman notes both elements shared "an abhorrence for fascism and a dedication to the rights of labor and the oppressed" but diverged in other respects. Crucially "for the first year of *PM*'s publication it vigorously demanded increased participation in the war against Hitler; the *Daily Worker*, defending the German-Soviet pact, emphatically demanded 'Peace'".⁵⁰ The demise of the 2-year-old *Friday* after US entry into the war has been attributed to a combination of its "anti-war, anti-interventionist stance" and "the economics of the mass illustrated magazine" in which revenue derived from advertising (which *PM* eschewed and *Friday* failed to attract) rather than circulation.⁵¹

Between the demise of *Friday* and the 1944 publication of his articles on Ireland in *PM* Sayers was the co-author with Albert E. Kahn of a best-selling book – *Sabotage! The Secret War Against America*. The FBI sought, and was given, access to the material on Axis "fifth column" activities accumulated by the authors.⁵² Apart from a discussion of Fr. Coughlin and the Christian Front under the heading "psychological sabotage", neither Ireland nor Irish-Americans feature in the book. Sayers and Kahn went on to write *The Plot Against the Peace: A Warning to the Nation!* (1945) and *The Great Conspiracy: The Secret War Against Soviet Russia* (1946). Whether Sayers was a member of the Communist Party is not directly addressed by any of the writers of his obituaries but, given the treatment of Stalin's regime in the last of these co-authored books, it is scarcely possible that he was not. The English-born scion of a wealthy Jewish family, Albert E. Kahn had been a party member since 1938 and, in discussion of evidence provided by decoded Soviet cables, has been identified as "a likely match for an unidentified KGB asset with the cover name Fighter". He was certainly a source of wartime information to the Soviet as well as the US authorities, the former having a particular interest in Ukrainian organisations to whose US "fifth column" activities *Sabotage!* had devoted a considerable amount of attention.⁵³

Sayers turned back to drama after the war, having a play set in Ireland briefly staged on Broadway in 1948 and writing for the new medium of television. However with the intensification of the Cold War the wartime "brown scare" directed towards the Right and ethnic groups whose homelands exhibited a mix of hostility to the Soviet Union and collaboration with its German invaders was succeeded by a "red scare" in which Communists and those deemed to be their "fellow travellers" were targeted. Former hunters now became the hunted ones, their exposure increased by state disregard for the liberties of suspect individuals and groups of a kind that they themselves had earlier condoned. Sayers fell victim to the practice of blacklisting "Reds" and joined a diaspora of similarly afflicted workers in the culture industries that left the USA for a European exile.⁵⁴ Settling in France and working mostly under pseudonyms he contributed plays and scripts for series like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* to British television. In the changing context of the 1960s it became possible for him to work openly under his own name again. He was one of the credited screenwriters on the 1967 film *Casino Royale* and he returned to the United States where he was to live for the last three decades of his long life. Three plays of his were staged in London and New York as late as the 1990s.⁵⁵

After his childhood years Michael Sayers spent only a couple of brief periods living in the country of his birth. Politically his mark was made on its rulers through his wartime political journalism in the USA. Culturally he made a wider public appearance when, 7 years after its New York debut, his play *Kathleen* was produced at Dublin's Olympia Theatre. Dublin in the mid-1950s was a city where theatres were being subjected to anti-communist picketing and the stage was about to experience serious church and state interference.⁵⁶ Within this context, the absence of controversy around the staging of a play by a writer then blacklisted in the USA under that author's real name is quite remarkable. It is with a brief consideration of this episode that this paper concludes.

As the Cold War intensified, the main activist group pursuing an anti-communist agenda in relation to Dublin theatres was the Maria Duce vehicle, the Catholic Cinema and Theatre Patrons Association (CCTPA). Thanks to the profile Fr. Coughlin's promotion of his work had given him in the USA, Maria Duce's inspiration, Fr. Denis Fahey, had acquired a range of like-minded transatlantic connections with whom he corresponded extensively. These included State Senator Jack B. Tenney, a long-serving Chairman of the Californian Joint Fact-finding Committee on Un-American Activities whose methods anticipated those of US Senator Joseph McCarthy, and Myron C. Fagan, the extremist California-based Director of the Cinema Education Guild. Material supplied from California was deployed in a CCTPA campaign that led to cancellation of a planned appearance in Dublin of actor Gregory Peck in 1949. Next to attract CCTPA attention was Orson Welles, picketed when he attended a December 1951 performance in the Gate Theatre where he had first acted as a teenager in the early 1930s. CCTPA picketers were also present when Danny Kaye appeared at the Theatre Royal in June 1952, on this occasion facing charges of communist fellow-travelling with anti-Semitic innuendo. But, partly because "Fahey died in 1954 and he took with him the transatlantic connections that were vital to the activities of the group", CCTPA subsequently became moribund and Michael Sayers escaped their brand of vigilance.⁵⁷

During the early 1950s CCTPA had been criticised in the more mainstream Catholic periodical the *Standard* for its "holy hooliganism" but it was this weekly that whipped up opposition to the production of a new Sean O'Casey play and prompted disruptive disturbances in the Gaiety Theatre on the opening night of *The Bishop's Bonfire* in February 1955.⁵⁸ The playwright being an avowed Communist and a critic of clerical power in Ireland were the chief grounds of objection in this case. Yet only six months later a blacklisted Michael Sayers not only escaped political condemnation but obtained a relatively positive review in the *Standard* for what was generally held to be a weakly constructed play – "Mr. Sayers has attempted something very difficult in this play and with considerable success: for it is an essay in optimism garnished with many effective and amusing scenes".⁵⁹ *Kathleen* was a light romantic comedy interwoven with some allegorical commentary on the state of Ireland – the eponymous heroine's successful suitor is a modernising soldier-engineer, his main vanquished rival is the heir to a wealthy gombeenman. In New York 7 years earlier the *Billboard* reviewer had noted this aspect of the play – "the author gives his hero an Act III message to mouth – a blasting of Irish citizenry as it is and a plea for what it ought to be – in true Robert Emmetian tradition".⁶⁰ But on 17 August 1955 An Irishman's Diary piece in the *Irish Times* compared Sayers favourably with O'Casey in this regard. The latter's "tracts" were no longer taken seriously because "he has made the bad psychological blunder of

thundering them out too ponderously without very much of the real spice of humour". Sayers, by contrast "sweetens his allegorical pill about the tribulations of Kathleen Ni Houlihan with real comedy". These observations were followed by some biographical details on "our newest playwright". These referred to his father Philip "who has been well-known both in commercial and artistic circles here for half a century" and to Michael's time at Trinity College before bringing matters up to date in a delicately selective way:

Some years before the war he went to America, at a time when liberal periodicals could still find a readership there, and became a contributor to *PM* while building a substantial reputation as a writer of radio scripts. In the early years of the war he published "Sabotage", a book on the lines of "Guilty Men", indicting the pre-war appeasement politicians and American isolationists, which became a best-seller overnight. "Kathleen", which was written in the forties, actually had a New York production, in the Mansfield Theatre, in 1948. It didn't last very long on Broadway but that fact is no direct reflection on the play, for the average run of Broadway productions in 1948 was four nights. The author has been living in France for some years past, and is now, I believe, writing television scripts for one of the new commercial British companies.⁶¹

Before it opened *Kathleen* was the subject of another *Irish Times* story which reported that "in a few weeks the B.B.C. will spread its tentacles deep into the heart of the Republic to scoop up from Dublin the entire production of a new play. In due course the play will come back to us floating on the ether waves from Belfast".⁶² Actually when *Kathleen* was shown on BBC television in September 1955 it had a different cast from that of the Dublin theatre production and the significant part of the story resides in its reference to the then new Divis Hill transmitter which gave BBC television a footprint extending beyond the Irish portion of the United Kingdom. The 12 August issue of the *Standard* that noted the impending opening of *Kathleen* at the Olympia contained an editorial entitled "Television – A New Danger?". This concluded that:

With the possible erection of further booster stations the entire area of the Twenty-Six counties may well come within the range of both the B.B.C. and of the Independent Television Authority. We will no longer be living in a spiritual hot-house. The danger we see is that the icy blasts of scepticism, disbelief and ridicule may not be controlled and that they might reach gale force.⁶³

The breaking of the hot-house windows would proceed slowly and it would be work in which domestic as well as foreign television stations took part but the icy blasts to which it allowed entry certainly reached gale force within Michael Sayers' lifetime. In the process the spiritual hot-house was revealed to have a dark underbelly of abusive institutions (principally industrial schools and Magdalene laundries). The effectively enslaved labourers of these institutions would be compared to the Gulag inmates of that materialist hot-house, Stalin's Soviet Union, whose fate went unconsidered in the 1940s work of Sayers and Kahn.⁶⁴ Yet the combination of dramatic representation and journalistic investigation that eventually extracted official acknowledgement of the Irish institutional abuses⁶⁵ was also one discernible in the writings of Michael Sayers at an earlier date and in a different context.⁶⁶ If *Kathleen* was rightly lauded for its "real comedy" perhaps he might also be credited with being a very early forerunner of the surrealistic subversion of Irish Catholic clerical life by *Father Ted*.⁶⁷

Notes

1. Roth, *The Plot Against America*, 100.
2. The rights of Japanese-Americans were, however, largely disregarded – Milkman, *PM*, 162–4.
3. Milkman, *PM*, 3.
4. Roth, *The Plot Against America*, 8–9.
5. Milkman, *PM*, 146–7.
6. Dwyer, *Irish Neutrality and the USA*, 96–7 and 119; and see also Cole *Propaganda, Censorship and Irish Neutrality*, 91, 109 and 146.
7. Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland*, 181–2.
8. *Cables Hibernia to Estero 14 March 1944; Cables Estero to Hibernia 16 March 1944 and 17 March 1944; Cables Hibernia to Estero 24 March 1944 and 25 March 1944* (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs P90, Allegation By US Journal “PM” Re “Organised Anti-Semitic” Movement in Ireland (Michael Sayers) 1944).
9. *Copy of Patrick Mahony, Prince George Hotel, New York to Lennox Robinson 14 September 1944* (ibid.) Mahony adds in a postscript “the opulent Marshall Field owns P.M.”
10. *Colonel Dan Bryan to Joseph Walshe 9 November 1944* (ibid.)
11. *Copy of W.M. Gibbon to Jewish Defence League 22 February 1944* (ibid.)
12. *Colonel Dan Bryan to Joseph Walshe 6 January 1945* (ibid.)
13. Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland*, chapters 5–7; and O’Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 293–5.
14. Joseph Walshe to Frederick Boland 17 October 1946, (National Archives of Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs 313/6 Confidential Reports from Vatican Embassy (from 21 February 1945 – 17 July 1953)).
15. However the “pushing around” of Japanese-Americans by the US government and of Eastern European peoples by Soviet occupation forces went largely unchallenged by the newspaper – Milkman, *PM*, 162–4 and 181–6.
16. Milkman, *PM*, 37–8 and 59.
17. *Ibid.*, 152–3.
18. Joseph Walshe to John Hearne 1 January 1941, Document No. 377, Fanning et al., *Documents*, 422.
19. O’Drisceoil, *Censorship in Ireland*, 6.
20. Barrington, *The Wartime Broadcasts of Francis Stuart: O’Donoghue Hitler’s Irish Voices*.
21. Hull, *Irish Secrets*, 247.
22. Bell, *The Secret Army*, 189–212; and O’Donoghue, *The Devil’s Deal*, 167–177.
23. O’Halpin, *Spying on Ireland*, 31–2.
24. Goldstone, “Benevolent Helpfulness?”: and Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland*, chapters 5–7.
25. Moore, *Anti-Semitism in Ireland*.
26. McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy*, 254.
27. Douglas, “The Pro-Axis Underground in Ireland”.
28. McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy*, 353.
29. Athans, *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection*.
30. Brown, “Selling Airtime for Controversy”.
31. “In the Spring of 1942, emissaries from the Roosevelt administration warned Bishop Edward Mooney of Detroit that the Justice Department was considering filing charges against Coughlin unless he withdrew from all political activities. Mooney ordered his subordinate to retire from public life or face defrockment. Coughlin complied with this ultimatum and quietly lived out the rest of his days out of the public eye” McDonnell, *Insidious Foes*, 39.
32. Milkman, *PM*, 78–9; and Norwood, “Marauding Youth and the Christian Front”: Fein “For Christ and Country”: on the politico-religious complexity of New York city’s Irish-American community which in the 1930s and 1940s ran the gamut from communist to Coughlinite see Freeman “Irish Workers” and Hanley “No English Enemy ...”. Repeatedly accused by the

- Gaelic American* of spreading hatred of Catholics and the Irish, *PM* staunchly supported New York's Irish-identified Transport Workers Union – Milkman, *PM*, 131–7.
33. Irwin, *Inside the Christian Front*, 2–3.
 34. Lee, "Subversive Individuals of Minority Status", 165: Fr. Coughlin was not an Irish-American but a die-hard nativist who had criticised an Irish-American adversary in the mid-1930s for the latter's second-generation status. He was largely ignorant of the IRA and its concerns. In 1939 the Radio Priest attributed IRA bombing in England to "Czech terrorists" prompting a protest from Clan na Gael leaders – "Sprouting 'Isms': Irish Zealots Latest to Join Ranks of U. S. Fist Shakers," *Newsweek*, 13 March 1939: 17. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for information on these points.
 35. Keogh, *Jews in twentieth-century Ireland*, 172–3.
 36. O'Halpin, *Spying on Ireland*, 223.
 37. O'Drisceoil, *Censorship in Ireland*, 198–9. The instigator of the American Note (which Irish-based Allied Intelligence professionals did not support) was the American Minister in Dublin, David Gray. One might speculate as to whether Gray was the source of any of the material Sayers used in his *PM* articles. Leaking material to the US press was part of a larger campaign on Gray's part to pre-emptively discredit Irish-American nationalists, who were expected to obstruct post-war alliances in the same manner as they had contributed to preventing the United States from entering the League of Nations after World War I.
 38. Hull, *Irish Secrets*, 95; and see also O'Donoghue, *The Devil's Deal*, 171–2.
 39. Milkman, *PM*, 201.
 40. *Garda reports (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Justice JUS/8/945 Fiat (Spanish Newsletter) 11 Lr. Abbey Street Dublin).*
 41. *Frederick Boland to Colonel Dan Bryan 1 October 1948, Colonel Dan Bryan to Frederick Boland 8 October 1948 (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs Foreign Affairs A55/ I Communist Activities in Ireland).*
 42. On Fahey's dealings with ecclesiastical censors in relation to this work see Murray and Feeney *Church, State and Social Science in Ireland*: 40–1: it was eventually published in Ireland in 1953 but doubt has been cast on the validity of the Diocese of Ferns Imprimatur it carries – see Athans, *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection*, 71; Gaughan, *Alfred O'Rahilly*, 199–200; and Delaney "Political Catholicism in Post-War Ireland", 496–7.
 43. Father Denis Fahey to Archbishop John Charles McQuaid 11 November 1947 (Dublin Diocesan Archives McQuaid Papers AB8/B/XXI/80/54 Lay Organisations Maria Duce).
 44. Minute 3 December 1952 (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs 380/ 10 Maria Duce Organisation).
 45. Sean Sayers "Michael Sayers obituary" *Guardian* 9 June 2010; Military Archives, Bureau of Military History (1913–1921); W.S. 644 Michael Hyland; Military Archives, Bureau of Military History (1913–1921) W.S. 707 Michael Noyk.
 46. Michael Sayers to T.S. Eliot undated quoted in T.S. Eliot to Michael Sayers 11 December 1930, note 1; T.S. Eliot to Michael Sayers 9 April 1931, Eliot and Haffenden, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot Volume 5*, 429 and 539–40.
 47. Michael Sayers to T.S. Eliot 12 June 1931 quoted in T.S. Eliot to Michael Sayers 15 June 1931, note 1, Eliot and Haffenden, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot Volume 5*, 589: *Sabotage!* book flap information retrieved 20 April 2015 <http://www.american-buddha.com/sabotagesecretwar.4.gif>.
 48. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 94.
 49. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 158; "a wealthy young radical", Daniel Gillmor was the financial backer of *Friday*.
 50. Milkman, *PM*, 211–2.
 51. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 158–9.
 52. Charles, "Informing FDR", 228–9.
 53. Haynes and Klehr, *Venona*, 254–5; and Kuropas, "Fighting Moscow From Afar", 52–4.
 54. Neve, "Cases in European Film Culture and the Hollywood Blacklist Diaspora".

55. Sean Sayers "Michael Sayers obituary" *Guardian* 9 June 2010; "Obituaries: Michael Sayers Writer and poet who pioneered live TV drama" *Irish Times* 12 June; Gordon Bowker "Michael Sayers: Writer whose career never recovered from being blacklisted in the United States" *Independent* 22 July 2010.
56. Delaney, "Anti-Communism in Mid-Twentieth Century Ireland": Dean, *Riot and Great Anger*, 153–64; and Whelan with Swift, *Spiked*.
57. Delaney, "Anti-Communism in Mid-Twentieth Century Ireland", 899; Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 27 cites the example of the 'rabid screeds of the megalomaniacal Myron C. Fagan' when he observes that 'the anticommunist crusade was also served by a claue of authentic whack jobs'.
58. Dean, *Riot and Great Anger*, 151–2.
59. "Kathleen's Marriage Problem" *Standard* 19 August 1955.
60. "Broadway Openings" *Billboard* 14 February 1948: for a brief synopsis of *Kathleen* see Bordman, *American Theatre*, 272.
61. "An Irishman's Diary", *Irish Times*, 17 August 1955. According to this piece Michael Sayers 'was not in Dublin for the first night of his play, but is expected to arrive next week'. His father Philip, whose activities featured on a number of occasions in "An Irishman's Diary", may have been the source of the column's information.
62. "From Dublin to London for television" *Irish Times* 6 August 1955.
63. "Television – A New Danger?" *Standard* 12 August 1955.
64. Arnold, *The Irish Gulag*.
65. Kenny, "Significant Television": and Smith, "The Magdalene Sisters".
66. Some might query Sayers' credentials as an investigative journalist in the 1940s and classify him instead as a political polemicist.
67. Llewellyn-Jones, "The Grotesque and the Ideal".

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