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City streets and the city edition: newsboys and newspapers in early twentieth-century Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the newsboy as both an important figure of early twentieth-century Irish streets and also a vital final link in the chain of media production and distribution at the time. Despite the advent of industrial communications and manufacturing processes in print culture well before the end of the nineteenth century, newspapers in particular were ultimately dependent upon boys as young as eleven years old to sell copies, especially in urban areas. Newsboys were very visible and audible figures on Irish city streets, and presumably because of this were themselves the subject of frequent newspaper stories. This article explores the way in which newsboys were both part of the newspaper industry while simultaneously being represented in the press as exemplars of the urban working classes for middle-class readers.

KEYWORDS

Newsboys; newsagents; Irish newspapers; philanthropy; street trading

Introduction

The streets of Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century were literally paved with news. The daily newspapers would advertise their latest edition by pasting their headline posters onto the major roads – Dame Street appears to have been particularly favoured, but it occurred elsewhere in the city centre too. The *Freeman's Journal*, the *Daily Express*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Daily Nation* and the *Irish Times* all sent out “a ragged urchin with a watering can and a bundle of papers”, who threw water on the posters to make them stick to the ground.¹ This, of course, lasted only until the water dried out, leaving the posters to blow around the streets as new editions were pasted in their place. The Corporation attempted, in 1900, to prevent this practice on the grounds that it caused a particular danger to horse-drawn transport, but it was not until the relevant bye-laws were rewritten in 1909 that it was finally stopped. Prior to that, the posters for each paper's new edition were plastered to the very ground of the city, pedestrians pausing to read the latest headlines before perhaps purchasing the paper from a nearby newsagent or passing newsboy.²

This article will explore the ways in which Irish *fin de siècle* mass media, structured as it was by industrial technology and global flows of information, was nevertheless still dependent

upon a markedly embodied and contingent process for the final stages of its distribution. Newsagents' shops and newsboys on the street were the method by which the majority of urban readers saw, heard and purchased their news. The networked process of information gathering followed by the writing, typesetting, printing and distribution of early twentieth-century print media ended, in most cases, in a small local shop or the bundle of a "ragged urchin". These outlets were certainly the subject of great interest and emphasis at the time, and one of the article's central discussions will be of the ways in which newsboys became exemplars of street-life, and also the objects of public philanthropy – in both cases often because of their portrayal in the very newspapers they were selling, but rarely with any acknowledgement of those papers' own financial dependency upon the boys' juvenile and often destitute labour. Newsagents were also the focus of considerable attention in turn-of-the-century Dublin, if in very different ways. As retailers who could potentially have a considerable effect upon the sales of individual publications, they were often courted by publishers and editors, especially of Irish publications which saw newsagents' favour as a way of counterbalancing the greater advertising budgets of imported British papers and magazines. Other organisations, especially the vigorous social purity movement of the era, viewed newsagents as potential agents of vice, and policed them for "indecent publications" ranging from pornographic postcards to English Sunday newspapers. Political organisations, especially nationalist groups, also saw the value of newsagents as a "frontline" of media distribution, and it is no coincidence that Thomas Clarke, one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising, was himself a newsagent in the city.

Fin de siècle media – globalisation and technology

In 1900, print was still the dominant mass media form. Cinema and radio were both in their infancy – while there were several "moving picture" shows in Irish cities, they were still a novelty rather than an established entertainment form, and radio was still being used primarily as a marine communication system.³ By contrast, print media in all of its many forms was an economic and cultural behemoth, and one which had absorbed and made use of nineteenth-century technological transformations in communications, industrial production, and transportation. It had developed in tandem with the exponential increase in literacy among ordinary people as a result of compulsory education, the popular press having identified these new readers as a market to be developed, and having produced different types of newspapers and magazines to suit their tastes and reading habits. In Ireland this would take the form of popular fiction magazines such as the *Irish Emerald* and *Ireland's Own*, as well as the *Irish Independent*, an indigenous example of "new journalism", and which was begun by William Martin Murphy in 1905 and modelled on the British *Daily Mail* owned by Alfred Harmsworth.⁴

It has been argued convincingly that by 1900 (and indeed considerably earlier), Ireland was part of a globalised mass media industry and market. As early as the 1860s, it had been connected by telegraph to North America as well as Britain, a technological breakthrough which allowed news and information to cross the Atlantic (almost) instantly, allowing Irish newspapers to report American and other international news on a par with domestic stories. This "Victorian internet" collapsed the physical boundaries of time and space, as electric signals sent along the trans-Atlantic cable to Valentia Island and on to Dublin, London or Paris – the isolated west coast of Ireland was therefore one of the most important communications

hubs in the world.⁵ Other developments in printing technologies, paper manufacture, type-writing and typesetting allowed for ever-larger quantities of print media to be produced faster and cheaper in both Dublin and London, and transport developments such as steamships and (perhaps most importantly of all) trains allowed those papers and periodicals to be transported quickly and cheaply across increasing distances.

Speed of transport was especially important to the circulation of news media, and by the end of the nineteenth century British daily papers could be transported from London to even remote parts of Ireland before their news was out of date. This was a crucial moment in Ireland's experience of a globalised mass media. Prior to this, weekly newspapers and the vast array of story-papers, fashion magazines, and other special-interest periodicals had already been very successfully imported into Ireland from Britain, forcing Irish publications into a deeply uneven competition with rivals that benefited from enormous economies of scale. By the end of the century, however, British Sunday papers containing the previous day's soccer results could be distributed across Ireland in time to be read that day – these papers, with their sensational reporting of crime and divorce trials, would become one of the targets of the Irish social purity movement, but that in itself is an indication of their popularity, with some reports suggesting that as many as 40,000 copies were sold each Sunday in the greater Dublin area alone.⁶

The global media industry in 1900 was therefore a vast network of routes, hubs and nodes through which information flowed and paper was distributed. Certain hubs such as London, Paris and New York were the acknowledged world centres of news, leisure and literary publishing, but Ireland also had a comprehensive network of local, national and international media production and distribution. The absolute centre of this hub was, of course, the GPO on Sackville Street. Built in 1818 as the headquarters of the newly formed postal service, from 1870 it had also become the centre of the Irish telegraph system, and was thus the access point to the fastest forms of national and international communication. It was because of the GPO's connection to the telegraph system that in 1916 it was chosen by the rebels as the headquarters of the Easter Rising, but long before that it had been supporting a thriving world of publishers, printers, and advertisers, most of which were located within a short walk of the GPO itself. Most of Ireland's national newspapers, for example, were housed within this area – the *Irish Times* at the corner of Fleet Street and D'Olier Street, and the *Freeman's Journal* on Middle Abbey Street, which was also home to the *Irish Independent* and its sister papers the *Sunday Independent* and the *Evening Herald*.⁷ As well as these daily newspapers, weekly or monthly periodicals such as the *Irish Catholic* and the *Irish Military Guide* were located nearby, as were the populist story-papers such as the *Irish Emerald* on Middle Abbey Street, and *Ireland's Own* on Lower Abbey Street. Even specialist trade publications and almanacs such as *Thom's Official Directory*, at Middle Abbey Street, the *Irish Draper* on Lower Sackville Street, and the *Irish Law Times* on Upper Sackville Street were housed within this area.

As well as the publications themselves, the secondary businesses necessary to an industrialised and varied media industry were also concentrated within the area adjacent to the GPO. By the early twentieth century, these secondary businesses included paper and ink merchants, such as the Liffey Printing Ink and Chemical Co. on Middle Abbey Street, printers such as the Metropolitan Printing Works on Talbot Street or the Excelsior Printing Works on Fleet Street, photographic agencies like the Reliance Photo Engraving Co. on Middle Abbey Street or typewriting agencies such as Norton's Typewriting Copying Office on Upper Sackville Street. Book publishers as well as newspaper and magazine offices were also based

in the area, including M.H. Gill & Son on Upper Sackville Street, and Maunsel and Co. on Middle Abbey Street. More recent additions to these secondary businesses were advertising agencies, a modern development from the older form of advertising canvassers, individuals who negotiated between advertisers and publications to design and place advertisements. As advertising itself became more sophisticated, more visual and more pervasive, these canvassers were gradually being replaced by the earliest form of agencies. As Jennifer Wicke has argued, when James Joyce chose to make Leopold Bloom an advertising canvasser in *Ulysses*, he must have been aware of their anachronistic status by 1904, when agencies had already begun to operate in Dublin.⁸ The first of these, Wilson Hartnell and Co., had actually been founded in 1879, and was based just south of the river at Commercial Buildings on Dame Street. By the early twentieth century, however, it had acquired competition from Kenny's Advertising Agency on Middle Abbey Street, and O'Keeffe's agency on D'Olier Street.

As well as being close to the GPO's telegraphic communication system, the Dublin media based in this area were also within close reach of local and national transport systems. The city's tram network converged on Nelson's Pillar, more or less opposite the GPO, but more important for the transport of newspapers and magazines was the proximity of Amiens Street railway station and (a relatively short journey up the river) Kingsbridge station. Between them these provided for the rapid national distribution of publications, the speed of which was particularly important for daily newspapers. Although outside the scope of this discussion, it is also worth remembering that the national train network also provided a wider distribution system for the huge numbers of local and regional papers which were an important part of the Irish media landscape by the early twentieth century – papers all across the country, from the *Enniscorthy Guardian* in Co. Wexford to the *Kilrush Herald and Kilkee Gazette* in Co. Clare, would have used local train services to distribute their publications. That well-developed national train network also linked to the international transport network, however, particularly via the ports at Dublin and Kingstown. It was via this route that large-scale imports of British newspapers and periodicals arrived via steamship and train every day in Dublin, Cork and rural Ireland.

Whether a newspaper came off the presses in London or Dublin, however, it was generally distributed to retail newsagents by a wholesaler. There were several of these in Ireland, and most of them also had their offices in the vicinity of the GPO, alongside the publications they were distributing. One such wholesaler was William Dargaville Carr, who had offices on Middle Abbey Street. Carr had lived in Britain for many years, and had been fellow-Irishman Alfred Harmsworth's earliest investor in *Answers*, the publication which began Harmsworth's publishing empire. When, in the 1890s, Carr decided to relinquish his partnership in *Answers* and return to Ireland, Harmsworth guaranteed him sole Irish wholesaling rights for all of his corporation's titles – this would have been a very lucrative operation, including as it did *Comic Cuts* and other popular periodicals as well as *Answers* itself, which was one of the best-selling popular papers of the era.⁹ The overwhelming majority of British newspaper and magazine imports (as well as very many Irish publications) were wholesaled by Eason and Sons, however. Established in the 1850s as the Irish branch of British wholesaler W.H. Smith, in 1886 it was bought as a separate concern by its manager, Charles Eason, and maintained both its offices and a large retail premises on Sackville Street, next door to the GPO. That sale involved an agreement that all British titles handled by W.H. Smith would be distributed in Ireland exclusively by Eason's, an agreement which lasted until well after Irish independence.

As by far the country's largest wholesaler, Eason's oversaw a significant part of the mass media network in Ireland. They placed orders with British and Irish newspapers, magazines and book publishers (they operated book stalls at railway stations around Ireland, selling cheap novels as well as newspapers and magazines for travellers to read on train journeys, and in fact became book publishers themselves by the end of the nineteenth century) for bulk copies of their publications, usually sold by the quire, which consisted of twenty-four individual papers – these were sold on as bundles, which were four quires. They also received orders from retail newsagents all over Ireland (including Ulster, prior to 1922), and dispatched the requisite copies of the *Irish Times*, the *Freeman's Journal* or the *Daily Mail* via the train network, with a vast and intricate delivery system upon which depended the success of many papers, especially daily newspapers which could not afford to be delivered late. Some Irish weekly or monthly publications encouraged readers to take out annual subscriptions and have their copies delivered directly to them through the post, presumably in part because of the guaranteed sales income it gave them. It is not clear how popular this option was, although it seems reasonable to assume that it would have appealed most to readers in more isolated rural locations, and who did not regularly pass a newsagent's shop. In towns and cities across Ireland, however, most people bought their newspapers and periodicals from a newsagent, whether on a regular order or on a whim while passing the shop.

Newsagents

Most newsagents were small retail shops, located either on busy shopping streets in town and city centres or in residential areas such as the growing Dublin suburbs. There were a significant number of them within the area around the GPO itself, including Eason's own retail shop (and their lending library next door), as well as James Tallon's shop on North Earl Street and Dawson and Co. on Upper Sackville Street. By 1909 Thomas Clarke, who would be executed as one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, had opened a newsagent's shop in Great Britain Street, with the specific intent of helping to promote the radical nationalist publications such as *An Claidheamh Soluis* and *Irish Freedom*. Not surprisingly, Clarke's shop was of considerable interest to the authorities, but other newsagents were also targets of police surveillance.¹⁰ In 1908, eight Dublin newsagents were prosecuted for selling "indecent" postcards.¹¹ These were clearly a profitable sideline for newsagents, described in court cases as often kept literally under the counter, and newsagents were also (in some cases at least) very likely vendors of other forms of pornography. By the early twentieth century, however, the social purity movement (in the form of the Catholic Truth Society and later the Irish Vigilance Association) was also specifically and very visibly targeting newsagents' shops as being distributors of "pernicious literature". This was a wide-ranging category of publication which went far beyond actual pornography, and included "racy" novels, "bathing beauty" photographs or postcards, and most of all the imported British papers such as the *News of the World* whose reporting of divorce cases was felt to be particularly injurious to Irish Catholic morality. By 1902 the Vigilance Association was using a system of "Approbation Cards" to be displayed in the windows of newsagents who had pledged not to sell publications deemed "pernicious", and by 1911 there were pickets of shops which sold British Sunday newspapers. These pickets were often large, and sometimes became violent, with windows being smeared with mud and customers jostled.¹² The most celebrated instance of Vigilance Association intervention into the mass media network in Ireland occurred in Limerick, when a large crowd

led by a local priest intercepted Eason's special delivery of British Sunday newspapers to the nearby army barracks, and burned them in a giant bonfire.¹³

Newsagents also received more benign attention, especially from the editors and publishers of Irish publications, who hoped that they would promote their papers by way of prominently displayed window posters, visible display of the publications themselves, and word-of-mouth encouragement to customers. This was above all a recognition by the editors of populist Irish publications such as the *Irish Packet* or *Ireland's Own* that well-disposed newsagents could assist their sales in a way which might help to counteract the power of their imported British rivals such as *Tit-Bits* or *Answers*, who could offer more lavish competition prizes, more exciting illustrations (including photographs by 1900), and more famous authors of stories and serials, all as a result of greater economies of scale. Editors generally courted newsagents by attempting to involve them in the competitions which they ran on a more or less constant basis. In 1905, for example, the story-paper *Irish Emerald* required readers, when completing the cut-out coupon which had to accompany their entry to a "Puzzle Picture" competition, to give the name and address of the newsagent from whom they had bought their paper. When it later publicised winning entries, it also publicised the newsagent in question, in effect providing free advertising for the shop. In the same year, the *Irish Packet* (which was the *Freeman's Journal's* story-paper subsidiary) actually ran a competition just for newsagents, described as being "open to all who sell newspapers entailing no heavier responsibility than the fair display of the placards of the *Irish Packet* and a reasonable recommendation of the paper to intending customers", which awarded prizes for the greatest increase in either absolute or proportionate sales.¹⁴

The visual display of posters and placards, of the kind promoted by the *Irish Packet's* competition, was clearly a vital part of news and media advertisement on the streets of Irish towns and cities at the turn of the twentieth century. As discussed above, the daily newspapers were literally plastering the roadways of Dublin with their headline posters, but the display in newsagents' windows of placards for weekly or monthly periodicals was no less important for their sales, and was obviously one of the most eye-catching features of urban life at the time. This is indicated in part by the fact that several photographs exist depicting these windows – all the more striking for the fact that shop-fronts were rarely the focal point of commercial photography of the period. The photographs show newsagents' windows crowded with posters and postcards, as well as placards placed around or even above the door. The posters and placards displayed newspaper headlines or advertised new serials or competitions in story-papers and miscellany magazines, all of which appeared in large, black typeface which would have been visible from across the street, in an effort to catch the eye of passing customers. Tom Clarke's tobacconist and news agency on Great Britain Street displayed placards for "advanced nationalist" publications as well as for *Tit-Bits* or *Answers*, and as such acted as a beacon for readers interested both in buying these papers and meeting others with similar views. The journalist Sydney Gifford recalled being attracted into the shop by "a daring display of placards", and then finding that it was "a rendezvous where people went to discuss topical events, to argue on controversial subjects, or to leave messages".¹⁵ While Clarke's shop was obviously unusual for its radical political stance, more mainstream newsagents would nevertheless have carried a wide range of publications, and their displays of posters and placards would have made them some of the most visible shop-fronts on urban streets. Small scale and economically insignificant as they each were, newsagents were the essential connection between the global and industrialised media

industries and the individual readers those industries depended upon. As one of the final nodes in the vast and sprawling networks of print media, they were individually insignificant but collectively vital to the flow of newspapers and magazines, some of which might have originated several hundred miles away in London. Selling papers for just a penny or halfpenny, and a few hundred copies at most from each shop, their tills nevertheless rang up a major source of the income upon which the entire media networks depended.

Newsboys

Despite their importance, in urban centres (and especially in Dublin), newsagents were not the only sales outlets for print media. Another extremely visible (and audible) outlet, especially for daily newspapers, was the newsboys who sold papers directly on the street. Extraordinarily anachronistic as it was, the globalised and industrialised mass media network of news production and distribution often ended in the hands of almost destitute child labourers. Street vendors of media had a long history in urban centres, with pedlars selling chapbooks and other printed ephemera throughout Irish towns and cities since at least the early eighteenth century.¹⁶ David Dickson describes mid-eighteenth-century newsboys on the streets of Dublin, selling to those who could afford their own copy of the emergent daily newspapers, rather than visiting a coffee-house in order to read one.¹⁷ Those earlier street vendors were not always children, and even in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dublin, not all “newsboys” were actually boys. One of the city’s most famous “street characters” of the time was Davy Stephens, who sold newspapers for many decades in and around Kingstown. Much photographed, and known for his correspondence with celebrities and aristocracy (including Queen Victoria), he was himself a local celebrity. Although Stephens was not the only adult “newsboy”, most street vendors of papers in Dublin were indeed boys, typically somewhere between the age of eleven and seventeen. There are occasional references in news reports and other sources to “newsgirls”, but it is clear that it was work done primarily by boys. Indeed, a Viceregal Commission appointed in 1902 to consider street trading in Dublin stated in its report that “it should be made more difficult for a girl than for a boy to be a street trader”, and although this was not made official policy, it is likely that girls were more specifically discouraged from trading.¹⁸

Often orphans or the children of inner-city slum households with no breadwinner, newsboys were only just above the position of beggars in both financial and social status. They were numerous, with an estimated figure of 1000 children selling goods on the streets of Dublin by 1902 (although this figure would have included girls as well as boys, and all child street traders including those typically selling matches, flowers and bootlaces as well as newspapers), and they each earned very little money.¹⁹ Their relationship to the newspapers which they sold was indirect and extremely precarious, despite their undoubted importance to those papers’ urban sales. They did not work for the newspapers, but were in effect independent contractors, who had to buy bundles of papers from the papers’ dispatch offices in order to sell them on. Sackville Street, the Quays, Dame Street, Grafton Street and Stephen’s Green were all popular “pitches” for selling, and contemporary commentary suggests that these pitches were keenly defended against rival sellers, especially those such as Stephen’s Green, where wealthy customers from the Shelbourne Hotel and the nearby gentlemen’s clubs were to be found in large numbers. Because many of the boys were so young, they were often vulnerable to physical intimidation by older teenagers and young men, who it

was reported would coerce them into giving up good selling pitches.²⁰ Their income – after deducting the cost of buying the newspapers in the first place – appears to have been only around five or six shillings a week.²¹ A writer for the middle-class women’s magazine *Lady of the House* claimed to have spoken to some newsboys at the Stephen’s Green pitch just before Christmas, asked one of them what he would do with the gift of a penny, and been told, “I’d cut down to Dame Street, buy three *Heralds* with it – maybe get off wan for a penny, it being Xmas times – then by three more, an’, with luck make sixpence on the night.”²²

A vivid picture of the life of a Dublin newsboy emerges from Conal O’Riordan’s 1920 novel *Adam of Dublin*, in which the eponymous hero begins life in the north inner-city slums and is sent out to sell papers by his destitute parents at the age of eight (the legal age for street trading was eleven, but of course there were many younger children selling newspapers and other goods). Unable to raise sufficient money even to purchase the necessary bundles of papers from the newspaper offices, however, Adam is initially reduced to scavenging out-of-date papers from the waste bins behind shops, and selling them as if they were new – a practice which required vigilance and fast reaction speeds when disgruntled customers realised, just after parting with their penny, that they’d been sold old news. The novel also depicts Adam’s fear and vulnerability in the face of other, older newsboys, who resent his appearance on a lucrative pitch near the Gresham Hotel.²³ In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom’s meander around the newspaper offices of Dublin, including that of the *Evening Telegraph* on Middle Abbey Street, is loudly punctuated at several points by a fast-moving crowd of newsboys arriving to collect a new edition, and described shortly afterwards as departing with “their white papers fluttering.”²⁴

The fact that newsboys were not employees meant that their often obvious destitution was not the responsibility of the newspapers. Some assistance was forthcoming from one rather unlikely source, however. William Martin Murphy, proprietor of the *Irish Independent* and the *Evening Herald*, in November 1905 established the “*Herald Boot Fund*” for the express purpose of providing footwear for Dublin’s juvenile street traders, whose frequently barefoot condition was perhaps the most visible indicator of their extreme poverty. The publicity and charitable events for this Fund did not make specific reference to newsboys, perhaps deliberately choosing to obscure the fact that as the single largest category of children trading on the city’s streets, the sellers of the *Herald’s* own papers would also be the largest category of beneficiary from the public’s generosity in donating to the charity.²⁵ A more structural and less public initiative was put into place at another of Martin Murphy’s papers, when at some point in the early twentieth century the *Irish Independent* introduced an official liaison between their dispatch offices and the newsboys. Known as a “shopper”, his role appears to have been to regularise the supply of papers to each boy, a system which the first “shopper” later described as “giving the newsboys some security of livelihood.”²⁶ This initiative, while it was clearly an improvement to the supply system experienced by newsboys, hardly seems to have improved their material well-being, however. Thomas Clarke is remembered as having had a particular sympathy for the newsboys’ plight, and “... when they had no money for papers they came to Tom for credit. They always got it, and rarely was his trust in them misplaced.”²⁷ Clarke, with his commitment to using his shop as a space to advance political action, was unusual among Dublin newsagents, but it is quite plausible that other newsagents also gave credit to newsboys who could not raise the necessary advance to buy their bundle of papers.

Constantly outside in all weathers, hawking their papers from the same street pitch day after day to passing pedestrians, often barefoot and dressed in rags, the newsboys would have been some of the most visible representatives of Dublin's appalling slums on the more prosperous main streets of the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were also extremely audible, since their primary method of selling papers (aside from carrying headline placards) was to "cry" the arrival of a new edition and its particular stories, whether those were racing results or breaking news. The sound of newsboys breaking into choruses of new headlines, echoing over each other in the city streets, would often have been the first indication for readers of new stories, and therefore a reason to purchase a paper. This was a crucial part of the immediacy of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century newspapers, and in turn one of the most important roles of newsboys within the newspaper industry – to publicise breaking news and, effectively, to create demand for it. Their "cries" of breaking news were extremely efficient in this regard – cheaper, faster and more noticeable than headline placards or any other form of visual display, they embodied the news in the city streets. In *Ulysses*, as Stephen leaves the offices of the *Telegraph*, surrounded by a crowd of newsboys with a new edition, his conversation is punctuated by their repeated cries of "Racing special!". These cries are part of the background noise of urban life, but unlike other sounds they do penetrate Stephen's consciousness, as they presumably did for real-life pedestrians in the city.²⁸

Probably as a result of newsboys' physical presence in the streets, there appears to have been considerable public awareness of them, and of their precarious economic and social status. As well as selling newspapers, they also appeared in them on a fairly regular basis. By the early twentieth century, "newsboy stories" were a regular feature of newspaper columns, presumably inspired in part by their subjects' constant visibility to readers. One of the common forms these stories took was of the "plucky newsboy" performing a heroic deed of some kind. One much-reported instance from Belfast in 1908 was the "Newsboy Raleigh" (as the headlines referred to him) who threw his bundle of papers down on the wet footpath in order to allow the visiting opera singer (and global celebrity of the time) Nellie Melba to reach her carriage without stepping in a puddle. Not only the act itself, but Melba's later letter of thanks and cheque for £5 were much reported.²⁹ More dramatically, the following year the *Irish Times* reported on a newsboy's "plucky conduct" when he dived into the Liffey to save a man who had just jumped off O'Connell Bridge, and brought him to safety assisted by a passing police constable.³⁰ In 1910, it was reported that a "newsboy detective" in Derry saw a suitcase stolen from a man who had fallen asleep on a bench while waiting for his train at Lough Swilly station. The newsboy followed the thief, saw him deposit the suitcase in the left luggage office and then staked out the luggage office the following day until he saw the thief return for it, at which point he alerted the police. The *Irish Times* reported that the boy had been commended in court for having "acted like Sherlock Holmes".³¹

All of these stories position newsboys as not only brave but also quick-witted and displaying a kind of "street smarts" which perhaps reassured the middle-class readers that the ragged urchins they encountered as they bought their newspapers were capable and thriving denizens of the city streets, rather than vulnerable and suffering children. Other recurring newsboy stories were those which featured "lucky" boys who were somehow lifted out of their life on the streets. One much-reported example of this was the case of Pat Kane, who sold a newspaper to the Speaker of the South Australian Legislature Assembly as he left the Gresham Hotel on Sackville Street in 1913. Kane struck up a conversation with the Speaker,

and told him that he would like to emigrate to Australia – when the boy appeared again the next day, “washed and scrubbed, as, possibly, he had never been before, but still barefooted”, and repeated his request, O’Loughlin agreed to cover his emigration expenses.³² Two years earlier the Lord Chancellor had had to issue a statement officially denying persistent rumours that a Dublin newsboy had inherited a vast fortune which, because of his status as a minor, was being kept from him by the Court of Chancery.³³ Where the tales of heroic newsboys emphasised their quick wits, these stories came closer to recognising their need for “rescue” from the streets, but did so in a fairy-tale manner, and again were sentimental tales designed to comfort the middle-class reader rather than the many children remaining on the streets after one had sailed for a new life in Australia.

These narrative understandings of newsboys as either quick-witted and street-smart or deserving recipients of a fairy-tale “rescue” from the streets, drew heavily from the long-established melodramatic tradition in which “street arabs” (a term much used by Irish newspapers to describe newsboys) were presented as either semi-feral and thriving, or innocents in need of rescue. In Dickensian terms, then, the newsboy was understood as somewhere between the Artful Dodger from *Oliver Twist*, Joe the crossing sweeper from *Bleak House*, or Pip from *Great Expectations*. The Dickens connection could sometimes be explicit – in 1907 the Dublin Dickens Fellowship (an organisation established a few years earlier in appreciation of Dickens’ writing, but also to put into practice the principles of social reform and philanthropy represented in his novels) chose newsboys as the object of their Christmas philanthropy. Presumably in the spirit of *A Christmas Carol*, the Fellowship arranged a dinner at the Sackville Café on Christmas Day for 170 newsboys – held in the heart of the newspaper industry’s area of the city, it was also attended by senior staff from the *Daily Express*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times*.³⁴ Other fictional parallels to these “newsboy stories” in the papers were also available. Horatio Alger’s wildly popular American stories of poor boys rising to success through either hard work or the intervention of rich benefactors, which had been serialised in the popular press for decades by the end of the nineteenth century, specifically featured newsboy heroes. *Dan, the Newsboy: The Story of a Boy’s Life in the Streets of New York*, for example, was Alger’s 1893 story of a New York newsboy who, as a result of his honesty and intelligence, saves an heiress who has been kidnapped and is then himself made the heir to her aunt’s fortune, as a mark of her family’s gratitude.³⁵ Closer to home, Conal O’Riordan’s eponymous newsboy hero in *Adam of Dublin* is also rescued from the misery of selling newspapers by a wealthy bachelor (who it is strongly implied – although never confirmed – is also his grandfather) who eventually arranges for him to attend Belvedere College, and begin his rise to respectability and wealth.³⁶

Not surprisingly, given both their plight and visibility, newsboys were indeed the object of a great deal of philanthropic and regulatory interest. Perhaps because of his family’s newspaper business connections, much of this was led by William Martin Murphy’s son, Dr Lombard Murphy. In 1908, Lombard Murphy and a Dublin probation officer, Miss Cathleen Gargan, co-founded the Dublin Boys Club as a charitable organisation for the city’s newsboys. With premises on Great Brunswick Street presided over by Gargan, the Club provided recreation, food, clothes and supervision of the boys while they were not out selling papers.³⁷ As a probation officer, Gargan was also regularly involved in the more official regulation of newsboys, via the Children’s (Street Trading) Court, established in order to enforce the 1903 Employment of Children Act.³⁸ This legislation, which applied to all juvenile street traders, dictated that children between the ages of eleven and seventeen had to be licensed to

trade. The licences were granted and overseen by the Children's Court, on the condition of continued school attendance and general good behaviour on the streets. In 1910, the Court granted 700 licences (not all of which would have been to newsboys, but they would probably have accounted for the majority), although this was reduced to 382 by 1912 amid apparent concerns about the "problem" of extensive street trading.³⁹ Recipients of licences received a badge identifying them as "official" street traders, as well as donations of boots and shirts from the Dublin Boys Club via Cathleen Gargan, who was often present at Court hearings in her more official capacity as a probation officer. As well as the donations of footwear and clothing, the Justice of the Peace presiding over the Court arranged an annual "treat" for the boys each summer. In 1912, for example, it was a day's cruise in Dublin bay on a chartered boat, including games, prizes and a picnic.⁴⁰

Newsboys, morality and criminality

As well as being objects of philanthropy, the newsboys were also the subject of moral scrutiny from the vigorous social purity movement of the early twentieth century. Given the Vigilance Association's attempts to police newsagents as the potential purveyors of "pernicious literature", it is hardly surprising that they would also have paid attention to the role of newsboys as distributors of the popular press. Indeed, given the economic precarity experienced by most newsboys, along with their largely unsupervised mobility in the city streets, it seems logical to assume that a proportion of them sold not just British publications such as the Sunday newspapers against which the Vigilance Association openly inveighed, but also the more explicit pornography which was rarely mentioned in public debates, but which overshadowed all discussions of "evil publications". It is therefore not surprising that newsboys should have been a focus of social purity attention along with newsagents. In 1911, at a meeting of the Dublin Vigilance Association, the Reverend Myles V. Ronan announced that he had extracted a pledge from 100 newsboys not to sell "objectionable" papers, and shortly after this those newsboys were reported to be wearing badges which declared "Dublin Vigilance Association: no bad papers" while trading near Nelson's Pillar on Sundays. It is not at all clear how long this alliance of newsboys and social purity campaigners lasted, especially given the loss of income which would have been incurred by boys who normally sold British Sunday papers – one newsagent interviewed by the *Irish Independent* at the time estimated that it would have been between three and four shillings each.⁴¹

However, many newsboys were eventually involved in the Vigilance Association's campaign in 1911; far more had been involved in the strike action initiated by James Larkin earlier that same year. Part of a wave of industrial unrest that summer which was a forerunner of the full-scale strikes of 1913 (in which the newsboys would also participate), the strike of August 1911 was apparently concerned with the refunds paid to newsboys on unsold papers returned to newspaper offices.⁴² Certainly it was directed principally against the papers owned by William Martin Murphy, the *Irish Independent* and the *Evening Herald*, although other papers such as the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Evening Mail* were also targeted. Showing a keen understanding of the media distribution networks of which they were part, the striking newsboys obstructed the delivery vans taking papers from the *Independent's* and the *Herald's* dispatch offices to the railway stations, thus disrupting the national supply of newspapers. The strike began in earnest in time for the evening editions of Friday 18 August, when boys began confiscating and destroying papers from the vans of the *Herald*

and *Independent*. In a coincidental parody of the Dublin practice of plastering headline posters onto roadways in the city centre, the strikers scattered the newspapers across the roads outside the newspaper offices on Middle Abbey Street. Other vans were stoned by newsboys, with some drivers sustaining injuries.⁴³ By the next night, the unrest had grown, and the usually busy Saturday evening shopping streets around Sackville Street – which were also the streets where most of the city’s papers were based – were described as tense. Large crowds of newsboys and other strikers gathered within the area, including “a number of newsboys who came to these streets with the pockets of their tattered clothes filled with stones”, while others broke into a bicycle shop on Lower Abbey Street and broke up wooden crates to create makeshift weapons. Not only were seventy policemen on duty in the vicinity, but by that point soldiers from nearby garrisons were being armed and there was a military magistrate on hand to read the Riot Act if the authorities deemed it necessary. Although this did not happen, there were several hours of riots, volleys of stone-throwing and mounted police charges upon the crowds along Sackville Street, Earl Street, Henry Street and Mary Street. These went on until well after midnight, and resulted in many injuries. The *Irish Times* later estimated that as many as twenty shops had their windows smashed, some of which were also looted (including Tyler’s Boot shop on Mary Street as well as a nearby cake shop; together a rather poignant reflection of the newsboys’ priorities), resulting in loss and damage estimated at £1000.⁴⁴

Considering the scale of these events, they very rapidly subsided after just a few days, the central issue of newsboys’ financial arrangements with the major newspapers apparently unchanged. Newsboys did participate in the 1913 Lockout two years later, again under the auspices of James Larkin’s union organising, but that also appears not to have altered their working conditions in any way. What their 1911 strike may well have done, however, was alter some of the more sentimental public perceptions of them. Boys who had engaged in what some newspapers described as “guerrilla warfare” with the police in the centre of the city were hardly the vulnerable waifs of either Dickens stories or of the genre paintings of barefooted street children which were so popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁵ Indeed, the determinedly sentimental portrayal of Dublin newsboys as essentially honest, hard-working and merely in need of guidance from figures such as Miss Gargan or Dr Lombard raises some questions in itself. The last quarter of the nineteenth century had been rocked by a number of revelations – all centred upon the London streets – concerning the sexual exploitation of very young working-class boys and girls. In 1885 there had been W.T. Stead’s sensational revelations in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the ease with which girls as young as thirteen could be forced into prostitution. Stead’s campaigning “new journalism”, published as “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” and famously resulting in his own brief imprisonment, also precipitated the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent to sixteen and also considerably extended the criminalisation of male homosexuality.⁴⁶ Only four years later, however, the Cleveland Street scandal had highlighted not only the existence of homosexual brothels in the heart of fashionable London but also that a significant number of Post Office messenger and telegraph boys (many as young as fourteen) were working in those brothels, having been recruited while in the course of their duties on the streets of the city.⁴⁷

No equivalent scandal occurred in Dublin. Nevertheless, it is important to note the proximity of the city’s newspaper quarter – the area around the GPO, especially Middle and Lower Abbey Street, Sackville Street itself, and Talbot Street – to the city’s legendary red-light

district, the Monto. Home to a number of openly-operating brothels, such as May Oblong's on Corporation Street and Mrs Mack's on Tyrone Street, one of the Monto's boundaries was in fact Talbot Street, the location of a number of printers, publishers and other businesses connected to the newspaper industry.⁴⁸ It is easily forgotten that the area was also residential, the location of some of the city's most notorious slums, and a number of the newsboys working around Sackville Street and environs would have been living within the Monto itself. Even for those who did not, the world of prostitutes and their clients was often literally within a street or two of the pitches where they sold papers, and the "street smarts" necessary to their survival, which in other contexts was so admired by their middle-class customers, must necessarily have included a full awareness of the business of prostitution. Whether this sometimes included their own exploitation in the manner of the London telegraph boys is unrecorded, but it would hardly have been unusual or surprising if it did, given their status as very poor and largely unsupervised children working on the streets and interacting with much wealthier adult men.

The possibility of newsboys being sexually exploited as a result of their street trading casts a new light upon some of the philanthropic and moralising efforts on their behalf. The Dublin Boys Club, founded by Lombard Murphy and Cathleen Gargan (and which would become the more well-known and long-lasting Belvedere Newsboys Club after the First World War), in its efforts to provide the boys with a supervised recreational space in the evenings, may well have been motivated in part by an awareness of the risks the boys were otherwise exposed to.⁴⁹ Cathleen Gargan, as a probation officer, must have been especially aware of the grim realities of life for the children who became newsboys. The social purity movement's attempted recruitment of newsboys to their campaign against "pernicious literature" might also be considered in light of their previous crusade against prostitution within the Monto. This took the form of night pickets outside brothels, challenging clients and demanding their names as they entered and left the buildings. The public discussion of this anti-prostitution campaign was, unsurprisingly, limited to euphemistic references to women prostitutes. Nevertheless, given the social purity movement's history of campaigns against the sex trade in general, some involved in the 1911 crusade against the "immoral" British Sunday papers may have been aware of the wider extent of the sex trade in the city, and even have seen a connection between it and the newsboys who had been selling imported publications of which they also disapproved. The particular opprobrium reserved for James Joyce's story "An Encounter" from *Dubliners* – it was, of the entire collection, the one principally responsible for the ultimate refusal by Maunsel and Co. to publish it, mainly at the behest of the social purity movement – is also instructive here. The story describes a deeply unsettling encounter between two adolescent boys (who have been exploring the city unsupervised for the day) and an older man on waste ground near Ringsend, and while it remains ambiguous in many respects, the stranger's sexually predatory behaviour is nevertheless clear.⁵⁰ The dangers – physical and moral – of adolescent boys roaming the streets of Dublin were occasionally and ambiguously highlighted in discussions of newsboys as well. As well as the Viceregal Commission established in 1902 to specifically examine the situation of juvenile street traders in Dublin, evidence from the city was also presented to a Home Office Committee on the same topic in 1909, and included claims that "the youthful street-trader is exposed to many of the worst of moral risks", citing newspaper-selling as a particularly "undesirable occupation for a boy during the critical years from 14 to 16".⁵¹ The bye-laws in Dublin put in place as a result of the 1903 Employment of Children Act had also

included a provision for the withdrawal of a child's trading licence if it were "being used as a cloak for ... immorality".⁵² The precise nature of the "immorality" which made newspaper-selling so "undesirable" for boys of fourteen to sixteen (and particularly why they were more at risk than even younger boys, for example) was not, of course, elucidated. It doubtless included a range of illegal or objectionable behaviours, including pickpocketing or even the fraudulent sale of old newspapers, as depicted in *Adam of Dublin*, but the term "immorality" strongly implies sexual behaviour, most likely implying sexual exploitation by men with whom they came into contact.

Conclusion

Despite the concerns expressed for the "injurious results to the moral, physical, the educational and the economic welfare of all who undertake [juvenile street trading]", there was little support for the (ultimately unsuccessful) proposal in 1911 that all street trading by children under the age of seventeen should be prohibited.⁵³ The most common argument, made by several commentators, was that such a prohibition would not prevent juvenile street trading but merely make it more precarious owing to its illegality. The fact that many newsboys were helping to support their families as well as themselves, despite their young age, was adduced as evidence that they had no alternative but to sell papers, and that this would therefore continue despite any change in the legislation. The licensing system, with its structures of surveillance and monitoring of the boys' behaviour and school attendance (along with its provision of a focal point for charitable action such as clothing donations), was argued to be a better way of managing the necessary evil of such young boys selling papers on the streets. This may have been true, but it also concealed the vested interests of some of those making the argument. The closest to an admission of those vested interests came from an *Irish Times* editorial, which admitted that they were "in the position of an interested party" on the subject, adding that the prohibition of juvenile street trading would "inflict upon newspapers a great deal of inconvenience". But, the paper continued, "our loss would not be their gain. It is estimated that, in Ireland alone, a sum of over £100,000 is distributed every year in wages to newsboys. This money is urgently required by their families ..."⁵⁴ Those estimated earnings seem very high, by comparison to other information available on newsboys' income, but it is the use of the term "wages" which is more striking – implying as it does that the boys were employees of the newspapers when in fact they had no such job security.

The newspaper industry, industrialised and globalised as it was by the early twentieth century, was still significantly reliant upon newsboys to sell its papers. A long production and distribution chain which included telegraph systems, printing presses, trains and steamships ultimately reached much of its readership via the hands of barefoot adolescent boys. The sentimental portrayals of those boys in newspaper stories about them as either plucky or lucky obscured the more fundamental reality that their labour – poorly paid and insecure as it was – was necessary to the success of those newspapers themselves. Philanthropic ventures such as the *Herald* Boot Fund and the Dickens Fellowship Christmas dinner (at which senior staff from several newspapers had presided) were a tacit acknowledgement of the structural inadequacy of this distribution system from the newsboys' perspective, but for the newspapers it functioned very efficiently indeed. The fact that the boys were not officially employed by the papers reduced their costs, while the apparently ruthless

competition for custom on the more prosperous streets ensured the most rapid circulation and maximum sales possible. The physical presence and persistent cries of the boys on the street – as opposed to even the largest headline placards displayed in newsagents' windows – would also have increased sales, especially in the case of new or special editions, breaking news and dramatic stories, none of which could be brought to the attention of passers-by as quickly or as cheaply through other means. Newsboys' voices and bodies on the streets of Dublin therefore remained structurally essential to the circulation of early twentieth-century print media.

Notes

1. "The Placard Nuisance," *Irish Times*, July 12, 1898, 3.
2. "Newspaper Placards in the Streets," *Irish Times*, May 19, 1900, 4.
3. Condon's "Temples to the Art of Cinematography" gives a full discussion of the very earliest cinema showings in Dublin, and Morash's *History of the Media in Ireland*, 128–30, has a discussion of the earliest uses of radio in Ireland.
4. See Steele, "The Mechanics of How We Bear Witness," 59–80, for a discussion of the *Irish Independent's* adaptation of "new journalism" for an Irish readership.
5. Morash, "Ghosts and Wires," 21–34.
6. "Meeting in Dublin," *Freeman's Journal*, November 6, 1911, 8.
7. It is worth noting that some of the more traditionally "Tory" papers, such as the *Daily Express*, were located not only south of the river but also in close proximity to Dublin Castle.
8. Wicke, *Advertising Fictions*, 126.
9. Cullen, *Eason & Son*, 82.
10. Litton, *16 Lives*, 100–2.
11. *Irish Times*, April 14, 1908, 8.
12. See Rains, "Nauseous Tides of Seductive Debauchery," for a discussion of the social purity movement's campaign against newsagents.
13. Cullen, *Eason & Son*, 250–2.
14. Rains, "Going in for Competitions," 140.
15. Cited in Forster, *Vivid Faces*, 148.
16. Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland*, 70–80.
17. Dickson, *Dublin*, 149.
18. O'Connell, "Juvenile Street Trader and the State," 492.
19. O'Brien, *Dear Dirty Dublin*, 175.
20. "Intimidating a Newsboy," *Irish Times*, September 9, 1913, 9.
21. O'Brien, *Dear Dirty Dublin*, 176.
22. Anon, "The Child Traders of the Dublin Streets," *Lady of the House*, January 1905, 11.
23. O'Riordan, *Adam of Dublin*.
24. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 184–5.
25. "Herald' Boot Fund: Hundreds of Pairs Being Distributed," *Irish Independent*, November 24, 1905, 6, is one of many articles extolling the work of the Fund.
26. Oram, *Newspaper Book*, 118.
27. Litton, *16 Lives*, 102.
28. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 183.
29. "The Newsboy Raleigh," *Irish Independent*, November 13, 1908, 4.
30. "Rescue from the Liffey," *Irish Times*, July 10, 1909, 11.
31. "A Newsboy Detective," *Irish Times*, January 11, 1910, 10.
32. "A Lucky Dublin Newsboy," *Irish Times*, May 10, 1913, 4.
33. "Dublin Newsboy's Fortune, A Good Story Spoiled," *Irish Times*, February 11, 1911, 4.
34. "Free Dinner for the Newsboys," *Irish Independent*, December 26, 1907, 6.
35. Alger, *Dan, the Newsboy*.

36. O’Riordan, *Adam of Dublin*.
37. “Philanthropic Reform Association,” *Freeman’s Journal*, February 28, 1913, 6.
38. O’Brien, *Dear Dirty Dublin*, 176.
39. “Philanthropic Reform Association,” *Freeman’s Journal*, February 28, 1913, 6.
40. “Outing for the Dublin Newsboys,” *Irish Times*, July 8, 1912, 10.
41. *Irish Independent*, November 27, 1911, 7.
42. O’Brien, *Dear Dirty Dublin*, 220.
43. “Newsboys Strike,” *Irish Times*, August 21, 1911, 10.
44. “Rioting in Dublin,” *Irish Times*, August 21, 1911, 9.
45. Daly, *Demographic Imagination*, 141–7, explores the international phenomenon of Victorian genre paintings featuring newsboys, flower girls and other children on city streets.
46. Stead’s campaign and its consequences for both journalism and public consciousness of the “white slave trade” in young girls is well known and has been the subject of much scholarship. Less frequently discussed is the way in which the consequent legal changes included very specifically anti-homosexual amendments, which made the criminalisation of all homosexual activity much more explicit than had previously been the case. An exception to this is Pavlakis, “Reputation and the Sexual Abuse of Boys,” 1–22.
47. Hindmarsh-Watson, “Male Prostitution and the London GPO,” 594–617.
48. See Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society*, for a detailed history of Dublin’s sex trade; see also O’Keefe and Ryan, “At the World’s End,” 21–38, for an assessment of the Monto which is particularly sensitive to its geography.
49. See Walsh, *How’ya Doc?*, for a history of the club in its later form.
50. See Mullin, *James Joyce and Social Purity*, 43–55, for a discussion of the complex relationship that Joyce establishes in “An Encounter” between popular publications and sexual deviancy.
51. O’Connell, “Juvenile Street Trader and the State,” 501.
52. *Ibid.*, 496.
53. *Ibid.*, 505.
54. *Irish Times*, April 19, 1911, 6.

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