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Writing the first draft of history — the challenges

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When one thinks of the United States and the role that newspapers like the New York Times and Washington Post played in exposing the true nature of the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal, the American media undoubtedly played a major role in exposing some of the greatest American scandals.

In Ireland, however, because our culture of secrecy and the partisanship of the two largest newspapers chains, the media tended to facilitate the distortion of the partition issue, which has been depicted as the driving force of so much that happened in Ireland during the 20th Century, such as the undermining of the Home Rule Movement, which arguably led to the Easter Rebellion and the War of Independence the Treaty controversy, the civil war, neutrality, the early refusal to join with the uniting states of Europe, and the Mansion House campaign, the Border Campaign, and the most recent Northern troubles. The media's role in exposing the events was complicated by our crazy libel laws in relation to the arms crisis, which became a kind of libel industry. The various factors together facilitated the obscuring of reality in relation to the partition issue throughout most of the century.

I grew up in this country from the age of four, but it was not until I went to university in Texas in the mid 1960s that I got my first introduction to 20th Century Irish history. People were saying here that you could not really teach history for a hundred years, so we never had any 20th century Irish history in school.

While taking a history course on Europe between the World Wars, I did a term paper on the Irish civil war. I thought the conflict was over partition, but to my amazement I found that partition really had nothing to do with it.

Eamon de Valera, who led the fight against the Treaty, essentially recognised the necessity to accept partition. He was the first person in the Dáil to advocate recognising the right of Unionists to partition. Otherwise, he warned that Irish nationalists would lose international support, and the British would then be given a free hand in Ireland.

When the plenipotentiaries brought back a draft Treaty on 3 December 1921, he did not object to the partition clauses, but he did suggested they should reject the oath prescribed for members of the Dáil, and he said they should try to put the blame on Ulster, if they could not get the desired amendments. This was patently disingenuous, but it would become a tactic to which de Valera would resort again and again throughout his political career.

After signing the Treaty, Michael Collins challenged de Valera to say what kind of treaty he wanted, and de Valera produced his own alternative, known as Document No. 2. It contained all of partition clauses of the Treaty. "We will take the same things as agreed on there [in the Treaty]," the president told a private session of the Dáil. 'Let us not start to fight with Ulster.'

De Valera and the cabinet had sent the delegation to get External Association in order to ensure that Ireland would enjoy the de facto status of the British dominions and would, in return, assume the responsibilities of the dominions. The British responded by offering to write into the Treaty any clause desired by the Irish to ensure that Ireland would have the de facto status of Canada. This, Collins felt, was better than External Association, because Canada would have a vested interest in ensuring that there was no British interference with Irish freedom, as such interference would set a precedent for British interference in Canadian affairs.

The Treaty provision requiring members of the Dáil to take an oath was the most controversial aspect of the agreement. Collins had actually proposed the oath, which was one of allegiance to the constitution of the Irish Free State and mere fealty to the British King by virtue of membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations. De Valera had proposed a similar oath, but he had been thinking of External Association. What de Valera wanted was the real status of a dominion and what the delegation got was actual dominion status. Parse the difference for yourselves.

De Valera privately admitted to the Dáil that the difference between himself and Collins was only “a small difference” over “that little sentimental thing.” He said the difference was so small that the British would not fight over it, but Collins said they would, even though it was not worth fighting over. So they fought a civil war here over that small difference. But de Valera subsequently distorted the difference by linking the whole thing up with the partition question.

He privately wrote that the election results of June 1922 demonstrated clearly that the majority of Irish people favoured the Treaty. But he considered it expedient for Republicans to abstain from the Free State Dáil, because they could not be effective there, as they would be greatly outnumbered. "Our presence at the meeting would only help to solidify all other groups against us," he wrote privately.

In short, he stayed out of the Dáil for strategic political considerations, but he pretended publicly that it was on a matter of principle. Publicly, he said, their abstention was because it was a partition parliament. He harped so much on partition that he managed to generate a whole series of myths about the issue – that it was the cause of the civil war, that the thirty-two counties were one, united "nation from the dawn of history," that Britain was totally responsible for partition, that the issue had nothing to do with religion, and that a united, politically stable Ireland would result, if the British would only withdraw from the Six Counties. He was able to get away with the distortions because the transcripts of the Dáil's private sessions were not published for almost fifty years.

He used just about every opportunity to promote the partition distortion. In seeking to highlight the issue, for instance, de Valera was one of the few politicians anywhere to oppose the 1928 Kellogg-Briande Pact, which sought to outlaw war. He objected to the pact because, he contended, Britain would use it to hold people in subjugation by insisting that signatories of the pact should not support struggles of national liberation within the British Empire. He was insisting that the Irish people should have the right to resort to war to bring about Irish unity, if necessary.

In the years immediately after the civil war the press was frequently biased against Republicans. Of course, few ever bothered to ask how those people who were flouting the democratic will of the Irish people could legitimately call themselves Republican. They were allowed to usurp the name, and de Valera was allowed to collect money from friends and supporters to set up the *Irish Press* group to present his side of the story. In the process he enriched himself and his family.

By jailing him without charge for 11 months, the government victimising him and thus afforded him the opportunity of regaining the leadership of the so-called Republican side.

Over the years de Valera would often complain about the discrimination against Roman Catholics and the incorporation within Northern Ireland of a nationalist minority that was much larger than the Protestant minority in the whole island. The two largest counties — Fermanagh and Tyrone — each had a nationalist majority. If the unionists of the North were entitled to partition, the nationalists there had an even greater right to re-partition.

During the Munich Crisis in 1938 de Valera told the British Attorney General that Dublin had its "own Sudetens in Northern Ireland" and he sometimes considered "the possibility of going over the boundary and pegging out the territory, just as Hitler was doing." He later admitted that he never asked for the transfer of those areas. He was content to abandon those people in order to perpetuate a legitimate nationalist grievance, and thus keep the partition issue alive.

He desired a united Ireland but only on his own terms. He made no effort to alleviate legitimate Protestant fears of Catholic discrimination on matters like birth control, divorce and censorship.

When speaking in Geneva about the problem of European minorities in 1934, he had said the best solution was to transfer the minority to its ancestral homeland, if possible. Privately, in diplomatic circles, he explained that he was thinking on the lines of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne in accordance with which Greece and Turkey exchanged certain populations. This was what we now call "ethnic cleansing."

When applied to the Irish situation, de Valera was not thinking of transferring Catholic nationalists from the six counties to the south, but the Protestant Unionists of Scottish extraction to mainland Britain and replacing them with a similar number of Catholics of Irish extractions from Britain. He was planning on an international propaganda campaign, but he could hardly have chosen a more offensive setting in the eyes of Northern Protestants to launch his initiative.

In March 1939 while in the Vatican for the coronation of Pope Pius XII he delivered a St Patrick's Day address over Vatican Radio. Describing partition as "an open wound," he appealed "to all who may hear me, and especially the millions of our race scattered throughout the world - to all who glory in the name of Ireland - to join us in a great united movement to bring it quickly to an end."

De Valera planned to bring his campaign to the United States but his plans were disrupted by the outbreak of the second world war. When he announced that Ireland was remaining neutral, he said it was because the existence of partition really left his government with no choice. In 1940 when the British offered to declare Irish unity in return for the use of Irish bases, however, de Valera showed no interest in the offer. Of course, at the time it looked like Germany was going to win the war.

De Valera secretly gave the Allies all the help he could short of war. This included allowing the British navy to station two vessels in Irish waters (in Donegal and Cork) for air-sea rescue purposes, allowing the RAF in Northern Ireland to fly over County Donegal, effectively having the Irish coast watching service report directly to the British, sharing intelligence information with the British and Americans, and ultimately allowing Irish diplomats in Berlin, Rome and Vichy to be used as American spies. The Allies deliberately distorted the truth about Irish policy because they feared de Valera would launch his anti-partition campaign after the war.

When European unity was being discussed in the post war period, de Valera decried any Irish interest in becoming involved because of partition. He had made such an issue of Irish unity over the years that the National Coalition made the ending of partition its primary objective when it came to power in 1948. But its efforts came to a grinding halt when it seemed to hand over power to the Catholic Church during the Mother and Child controversy. If the Northern Unionists ever wanted proof that Home Rule would be Rome Rule, then surely this was it.

If the coalition government had been serious about ending partition, de Valera told a meeting in Drogheda on February 28, 1954, the British ambassador would have been expelled and all trade with Britain severed. He had never tried to expel any British ambassador or cut off trade with Britain even during the Economic War of the 1930s, his Drogheda speech effectively demonstrated that he had never been serious about ending partition.

"There is one policy which we can pursue," he said, "a policy of trying to establish decent relations between the people of Britain and the six counties and ourselves." He added that he did not wish to make partition "a political issue, because I do not believe there is any one of the parties who have got the solution for it."

It was one of the great tragedies that he was not prepared to recognise this openly forty years earlier. He had made no real effort to bring about a normalisation of relations but just exploited the issue for his own political ends. He got away with this, because the Irish media tended to adopt partisan political positions instead of reporting impartially. The Irish Press groups supported de Valera's line, while Independent newspapers took the opposite view, and this was apparent to all.

Outside Dublin the Irish Times was largely dismissed as a Protestant Unionist paper. That was a distortion, but that was de Valera's Ireland.

The first newspaper article I ever wrote was for the Irish Press. I had just finished my doctoral dissertation in Texas on the U.S. and Irish Neutrality, for which I had access to the papers of David Gray, the American wartime representative in Ireland. In view of my conclusions I approached the Irish Press group as most likely to be interested in a series on the material. Then editor Tim Pat Coogan explained that he was "most interested" even though Gray "did not always hold the same opinion as the founder of this newspaper, whose son is now my Editor-in-Chief." He underlined the name of Vivion de Valera in the letterhead, and he added: "I am sure that your comments will be made with an historian's tact and objectivity."

I took that as his way of telling me to say only positive things about the Long Fellow if I wished the Irish Press to published it. It is ironic that, having protected the de Valera's reputation for so long, Tim Pat has, since he left the Irish Press, hardly had a good word to say about the man that many reviled as the blind bastard.

The problem in evaluating de Valera is that people have tended to be either highly critical or uncritical. While I am certainly no uncritical admirer, I do believe he was the most successful Irish politician of the 20th century. In the light of some monumental failures, his accomplishments had to be all the greater. He clouded some of his worst failings by distorting the partition issue for his own ends. The press facilitated by persistently aligning itself with one side or the other.

By 1954 de Valera had finally come to recognise the need build bridges to the Northern Unionists, but he was coming to the end of his political career by then. As a result he left an appalling legacy in a distinctly unstable situation. When the Border Campaign began a couple of years later, he came down heavily on the IRA by re-introducing internment without trial in 1957.

Although Seán Lemass and Jack Lynch later tried to normalise relations, the green wing of Fianna Fáil resorted to de Valera's old tactics when the Northern troubles erupted in the late 1960s. Some even tried to start the kind of war that he talked about in 1928.

The media were handicapped not only by our culture of secrecy but also our crazy libel laws. Take the events leading to the Arms Crisis for instance. "It is now necessary to harness all opinion in the State in a concerted drive towards achieving the aim of unification," Captain James J. Kelly of Military Intelligence reported on 23 August 1969. "This means accepting the possibility of armed action of some sort, as the ultimate solution."

Kelly was an honest man who was expressing his views in a forthright report that was forwarded to the Minister for Defence Jim Gibbons. He wrote (Quote) “If civil war embracing the area was to result because of unwillingness to accept that war is the continuation of politics by other means, it would be a far greater evil for the Irish nation.”

Such sentiments justify ranking the captain as the Irish personification of the classic oxymoron — military intelligence. Only the Dáil was entitled to declare war, but he got the backing and active support of Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney for ideas that were as treacherous as they were hair-brained. Other ministers, including Taoiseach Jack Lynch, Kevin Boland, and Brian Lenihan were informed about Captain Kelly’s activities, but they stood idly by, or quietly tried to facilitate him.

In fairness to Captain Kelly it should be pointed out that even the late Gerry Fitt, a reputed moderate nationalist was calling for action. “The day for action has arrived,” Fitt told a gathering in Derry in July 1968. “I am quite prepared to go outside constitutional methods.”

He blamed the Dublin government for its inaction. “I wonder sometimes if the Southern government is prepared to accept the responsibility for the reunification of Ireland,” Fitt told the United Ireland Association in Manchester later the same week. “They could be much more forceful in demanding their right to the six county territory.”

Privately he said much the same. On 13 September 1969 Captain Kelly called on Fitt in his Belfast home, in company with the Belfast Republican John Kelly and his brother, Billy. “Fitt made clear the urgency of the situation and that it was of paramount importance to get in arms immediately,” Captain Kelly reported next day.

While in Derry on the morning of 5 January 1970, Fitt told a crowd at the corner of Victoria Street that “it’s time to get the guns out,” according to Eamonn McCann in his book, *War and an Irish Town*.

Yet Fitt later threatened to sue various people who said or wrote that he looked for guns for defensive purpose. He did not have the kind of money to pay the costs if he lost the case, so whoever fought him was going to lose money anyway, and he was able to use this to engage in what amounted to legalised extortion.

He got around £20,000, from RTE, £15,000 from *Scotland on Sunday*, £4,000 from the *Sunday Tribune*, and £50,000 from the *Sunday Press*, which went so far as to conclude that Fitt was, as a result, responsible for the formation of the Provisional IRA. I believe Kevin Boland received literally dozens of settlements from RTE over people mistakenly saying that he was fired at the outbreak of the arms crisis, whereas he resigned in sympathy with Haughey and Blaney. He was not defamed, however because in reality he should have been fired, but Jack Lynch took too long to screw up the courage to do the right thing.

In 1999 Captain Kelly published the details in his book *Thimble Riggers*, and Gill & Macmillan decided to fight Fitt, if necessary when they published the details in Justin O’Brien’s book, *The Arms Crisis*. Fitt backed off, but ironically Gill & Macmillan ended up paying Captain Kelly —the man who thought war was just politics by other means —a sizeable sum over a transcription mistake in the book.

It was not until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that nationalist Ireland recognised unambiguously the right of the people of Northern Ireland to a separate existence, as long as the majority there desired it. This was a major step in establishing the decent relations with the majority in Northern Ireland that de Valera talked about in 1954. Hence the partition issue has been put to rest.

Last we had a controversy over another oath, as the hardliners posture for position. What immediately springs to mind is the dictum that those who are ignorant of this history are doomed to repeat it. We have repeated our history too much already.

Ends