

Déanta i nÉirinn- Arthur Griffith and the Politics of Publishing Irish Nationalism

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Abstract

Propagandist and Nationalist Arthur Griffith starts the Sinn Féin Printing & Publishing Company, Ltd and launches the Sinn Féin Daily, a newspaper created by Irish products and meant to sway Irish minds. Griffith, trained in the visual side of publishing, saw a need, whether out of losing money or readers, to expand his audience. In doing so, he created a new kind of political paper, visually swaying to attract the masses and marketing his political ideologies in new ways. Debts and harassment by other political papers wanting to use the Sinn Féin name saw his downfall.

Key Words

Nationalism, Ireland, Propaganda, Sinn Féin, Newspaper

Introduction

During times of war, propaganda is arguably the most influential weapon a writer can have. It can be their weapon of choice, helping to sway a country's people one direction or another. When it came to Ireland's struggle for independence from Great Britain, with the election of a Liberal Party to the British government in 1906, the Irish party again had the deciding votes in the Imperial Parliament in London, set the stage for a renewed attempt to gain Home Rule for Ireland (Broom 6). This wasn't the first time Ireland had tried to break free from Home Rule, the results often bloody and damaging to no one other than the Irish themselves. Indeed the years that followed would be some of the bloodiest Ireland had ever seen, but Arthur Griffith, chief propagandist of the nationalist movement, was determined to sway the country in the favour of Sinn Féin and in the way of Irish nationalism. Founded in 1904, the Sinn Féin Printing & Publishing Company, Ltd. was a Dublin-based enterprise. It published, and for several years also printed, the influential weekly newspaper *Sinn Féin* (Davis 34). But just as politics seems to go hand in hand with capitalism, the Sinn Féin Printing & Publishing Company took on the role of both political informant and bureaucrat, creating stormy seas for both political publishing and honest journalism.

Genesis of Sinn Féin Printing & Publishing Company, Ltd

In March 1906, Arthur Griffith, then the editor of the nationalist propaganda newspaper the *United Irishman*, was sued for libel by a parish priest (Staunton 130). Already in financial straits, and on the verge of collapse, Griffith saw this as an opportunity to start fresh and a chance to be free from the Irish Republican Brotherhood and other nationalist parties that had funded them in the past. After several meetings with new investors, Arthur was appointed managing director and editor. Griffith and the other board members were all well known in Dublin's nationalist circles. They were also influential personalities in their own right in regards to their respective social and professional fields. Griffith was not only a pillar of the Irish-Ireland movement but also, thanks to his father's leadership role in the printing trade and his own very substantial experience in the newspaper industry, a respected figure in Dublin's printing and typographical community (Ó Lúing 17).

Launching the Sinn Féin Daily

The daily newspaper was launched in 1908, two years after the creating of the company in an effort to internalise the printing of the newspaper. Arthur, having been trained in the graphic side of newspaper production, had both a professional interest in and a profound understanding of visual culture. According to the *Leabhar na hÉireann* (The Irish Yearbook), Griffith was aware of a shift in Irish reading habits, and he believed there was a market for a new kind of newspaper, particularly one based on American-style advertising techniques to promote Irish products. He wrote,

‘The most useful and by far the most profitable method of attracting the attention is through the medium of an illustration. A good picture invariably captures the eye, and if it is of sufficient interest, may be relied upon to induce the reader to pursue the matter further (Griffith 134).

Indeed it can be argued that Griffith started off strong, because the paper already had a firmly established brand awareness, something that Griffith was keen to keep constant throughout the paper’s life. Using the visual discourses to defend Irish nationalism against cultural Anglicisation was Griffith’s main running theme (Jones 19).

Marketing the Déanta i nÉirinn concept

The most iconic image to come from the Sinn Féin newspaper was the Déanta i nÉirinn. This logo was created by the Irish Industrial Development Association (IIDA). The text in Irish means "Made in Ireland". From the autumn of 1909, Griffith’s newspapers displayed it on their front page between the words ‘sinn’ and ‘féin’ in the title-piece. Both a trade description and a statement of Sinn Féin’s industrial politics, this mark played a fundamental role in the newspaper propaganda published by the SFPP (Jones 20).

Griffith felt the need to elaborate this point to his readers, exclaiming,

"Sinn Féin" is the only journal in Ireland entitled to use the Irish Trade Mark. The reason why is that "Sinn Féin" is the only daily journal in Ireland printed on Irish paper. "Sinn Féin" is

printed with Irish ink. All the materials procurable in Ireland that go to make up a newspaper are used in "Sinn Féin". All other daily journals in Ireland import their paper from England, America, France, or Holland. "Sinn Féin" is the only daily paper in Ireland that supports the paper-making and ink-making industries of the country. That is why "Sinn Féin" alone is entitled to bear the Irish Trade Mark. The Irish Trade Mark distinguishes what is Irish from what is spurious " (Griffith 27).

By blending politics and marketing, Griffith created a 'homemade' sales pitch. By highlighting Irish goods, it not only put the spotlight on the nation as a whole, but gave the newspaper a heads up on the competition, as other newspapers were put in question as to the source of their goods. The extent of this 'homemade' pitch extended to other goods as well and manufacturers who did not comply soon found themselves being prosecuted under British Trade Mark Law by the people who had for so long been suppressed by it.

Austin Molloy and the 'tabloidisation' of Sinn Féin Daily

Circulation of Sinn Féin was low and limited in its first few years. Wanting to extend its reach Griffith jumped on board with the new idea of a savings club for large families and low paid workers. The public responded and by September 1909, the newspaper had reached its peak audience at 64,000. However, the financial health of the publishing house remain in a state of flux, so Griffith decided to turn the paper in a direction that would make it appealing to a wider audience, what we might call 'tabloidisation' today. He grabbed stories from overseas, started a women's fashion column and hired Austin Molloy, a Dublin born designer to reimagine the papers graphics. At twenty-two, he was hired on and worked for the newspaper until 1911. As was the case for many of the contributors to Sinn Féin, Molloy used the Irish version of his name, Maolmhuidhe, to sign his contributions (Snoddy 429). His work flowed with Griffith's quiet but solid marketing and political agendas of Irish industry and the prevention of English influence and emigration. The emotionally charged struggles of a nation played out amongst familiar literary characters resonated with a weary nationalist audience. The character Molloy chose to represent the ideal citizen of an

independent Ireland was inspired by the iconography of Saint Patrick, the Virgin Mary, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and reflects the explicitly religious language of the Sinn Féin (Snoddy 429).

Readership

Conventionally speaking, the Sinn Féin Printing & Publishing Company is considered a failure. According to Virginia Glandon, one of the foremost historians on the SFPP:

'Sinn Féin's circulation grew, then dropped steadily during the years 1909 through 1911. The number of copies distributed during the week of 3 September 1909 totalled 64,515 : with 25,515 copies going to various agents throughout Ireland, 32,482 to Eason's, a major Dublin outlet, 5,472 to cash sales, and 1,044 to subscribers. During the week of 16 January 1910, the daily circulated 29,961 copies and the weekly only 3,463. In financial difficulty from the outset, the daily collapsed during that same month, but with its failure, the weekly raised its circulation to 6,307 during March of that year. [...] As of 3 March 1911, Sinn Féin circulated only 4,452 copies a week (Glandon 45)'

This approach however, as noted by Matthew Stauton, does not take readership into account. Stauton argues that the core business of the SFPP was propaganda and that:

In spite of falling sales and financial difficulties Griffith and his colleagues were very successful in achieving their aims. A conservative estimate would put readership at five or six times the number of newspapers sold, somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 and, if we consider these impressive figures, it is clear that in terms of propaganda the operation was a success (Stauton 234).

In terms of a political propaganda machine, the *Sinn Féin Daily* managed a high readership that extended to a wide audience. While some questioned that business move, had it not been done, in terms of the *Sinn Féin Daily* just being looked at as a newspaper it would have failed monetarily. Griffith set out to make a successful business but his ultimate goal was to stir the political pot that had been boiling so long in Ireland.

The Republican challenge and SFPP's demise

Such was the volume and impact of Griffith's propaganda that high-ranking Republicans seemed to be moving in at every angle to silence the spread of his unorthodox message. From the outset, they challenged the SFPP for the spokespersonship of the Sinn Féin movement and on 13 December 1906, only seven months after the first publication of Sinn Féin, Blumer Hobson launched his own weekly propaganda newspaper called *The Republic* (Davis 31). This was a small operation run by a group of volunteers however its small impact on the propaganda machine in Ireland could not be ignored. As its name suggests, its goal was to promote republicanism within Sinn Féin:

[The Republic] has been started to gather together all that is best and greatest, most progressive and far-seeing in Ireland round the Republican banner and to build up, not a Republican party, but an independent Irish Republic (Davis 33).

The Republic waged an all out attack against Sinn Féinism as defined in the pages of Griffith's newspaper. As a result of his tireless efforts to republicanise Sinn Féin, it was Hobson rather than Griffith who was chosen by Clan na Gael in 1907 to tour the United States and explain the movement to the Irish-American community. So successful was he in this that when he returned to Ireland, many Americans considered him the leader of Sinn Féin (Davis 32). Griffith, seemingly defeated, had one last trick up his sleeve: the SFPP was a limited liability company. This prevented any infiltration by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and with both the name of the company and of its publications registered with the Customs House in Dublin, Griffith and his colleagues effectively owned the name "Sinn Féin" and their newspaper would, in the eyes of a reading nation be perceived as the 'official' base of the political movement no matter how much Republican dissent was thrown at it.

In 1910, P.S. O'Hagarty and some of his London republican allies attempted to dissociate the newspaper from the party. Both O'Hagarty and Hobson attacked him in the *Irish Nation and Peasant*, which had replaced *The Republic*. With the aim of preventing any such incidents in the future, O' Hegarty proposed the following resolution at the annual Sinn Féin convention of 1910:

That this convention wishes to dissociate the Sinn Féin organisation from the general policy of the Sinn Féin paper in its recent developments, and that, in view of the fact that the organisation has no control whatever over the paper which bears its name, the Editor be requested to cease advertising the newspaper as the official organ of the movement (Griffith).

Protected as he was by the law, Griffith resisted this without any great difficulty and the group which gravitated around Hobson and O'Hegarty withdrew from the movement. This was not, however, the last time that O'Hegarty and Hobson would challenge Griffith. In the wake of another challenge by O'Hegarty in 1910, Griffith was forced to shut down the Sinn Féin Daily in January (Ó Ceallaigh 78). Political defections of prominent Sinn Féiners to Irish Freedom were having a negative impact on readership figures. Advertising sales fell forcing Griffith into sub contraction printing. What was once seen as a leader in print media was being reduced to little more than a pamphlet. By the time the newspaper was banned and closed down by British authorities in 1914, it had dwindled to four narrow pages containing a single block of text written exclusively by Griffith. With debts of almost £5,000, the shutting down of the newspaper was inevitable (Ó Ceallaigh 79).

Propaganda and politics go hand in hand and in this case the events leading up to the Anglo-Irish War were no different. With Britain's ever constant presence in Ireland becoming increasingly irritating to both the politicians and people the lure of a Irish paper written by and for the Irish and even featuring Irish materials was alluring in and of itself. But, it was also a smart marketing tool used to further the ideals of Arthur Griffith, an extreme Sinn Féin activist, who was one part political and two parts capitalist. Always hunting for the next successful business and free from old Irish Republican Brotherhood ties, he eventually landed the backing to create a 100% Irish paper. While sales were less than stellar, readership was high, thanks to a 'tabloidisation' of the paper helped in part by artists like Austin Molloy who were brought in to widen the paper's readership scope. But despite all his efforts, debts and attacks by other political papers wanting to use the Sinn Féin name ultimately floundered the company, closing its doors just a few short years after

it opened.

In his Sinn Féin Policy, Griffith uses a maritime metaphor to describe the Irish nation. He compares it to the crew of a boat in which 'every person has his or her own duties to carry out and is equally responsible for the safety of the boat' (Griffith 2003). Griffith was at the head of this vessel, using the company as his driving force for a brand new blueprint for Ireland. Some say he helped instigate the ban by the British government so he could move onto the next business venture. After all, the past has show us the Griffith was no stranger to failing and that he seemed to have an uncanny way of getting out of a tight spot both financially and politically. Regardless, even though it never fully materialised as he envisioned, Arthur Griffith paved the way for a new age of political and propaganda publishing, one that was, like himself, one part political and two parts capitalistic.

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