

Richard Kearney

Public Responsibility and the Press: I: Richard Kearney and Dermot Moran Talk to Douglas Gageby

Author(s): Richard Kearney, Dermot Moran and Douglas Gageby

Source: *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Media and Popular Culture (1984), pp. 13-23

Published by: Richard Kearney

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30023270>

Accessed: 07-09-2023 17:22 +00:00

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Richard Kearney is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Crane Bag*

Public Responsibility and The Press: I

Richard Kearney and Dermot Moran talk to Douglas Gageby

Douglas Gageby, editor of *The Irish Times*, was born in Dublin in 1918 and spent his early years in Belfast. He studied at TCD and then joined the Army. He joined *The Irish Press* on leaving the Army in 1945, as a junior sub. He became the first editor of *The Evening Press* in 1954, after a period as editor of the *Irish News Agency*, which had been set up in 1951 by Sean McBride. In 1963 he became editor of *The Irish Times*. In 1974 he retired from *The Irish Times* but returned as editor in 1977. He has written a book about growing up in Belfast, and collaborated on Louis Marcus's film, *Heritage*.

DM: The newspapers in Ireland have had a long tradition — except perhaps *The Sunday Tribune* — do you see yourself as preserving a particular tradition in the newspaper world? And is there a particularly Irish tradition of newspaper editing?

DG: The first and best tradition of newspapers is to print the news as fully and as fairly as possible; then to stimulate comment and discussion by giving your own opinion — that is, the people on the newspaper — and encouraging others to join in. That is what we are all at. I don't know if we do it in a particularly Irish or individual way, but you cannot edit a newspaper in this city and country without being conscious of those who have gone before you. I have a soft spot for *The Freeman's Journal*, partly for personal reasons. My wife's father was news editor of it during the rough times sixty years ago. Then, when I joined *The Irish Press* in 1945 many of the people around me had been on *The Freeman's Journal* too, and I found them and their outlook congenial. I have a particularly soft spot for a journal which was edited from the premises now occupied by *The Irish Times*. That was *Irish Freedom*. There is a plaque to mark the spot in D'Olier Street. Dev came to the unveiling ceremony. This wasn't a newspaper in the sense the *Times*, *Press* or *Independent* are today; it was a highly political weekly

journal and had some of the sparkiest polemical writing I have come across. I have a paperback of some selections with handwritten notes by Bulmer Hobson. As to the authors of the pieces — which were unsigned of course at the time, Bulmer and P.S. O'Hegarty wrote most of the polemics, and rattling good stuff it was. *Irish Freedom* was of course an IRB production but hasn't had the same exposure as some of the other revolutionary journals of the time. It packed a powerful punch. A lot of what they had to say then would be termed today Provo stuff.

DM: There was a very definite shift in *The Irish Times* editorially, from Unionist to Nationalist. Did you play a large role in that or did that happen before your time?

DG: I'm not so conscious of that shift as being from Unionist to Nationalist. When the then Board asked me to come over from *The Evening Press*, I did point out that my views on the national question mightn't be quite theirs. But they said they were happy for me to transfer from Burgh Quay to Westmoreland Street and would not lose any sleep over what I might write. There were never any rows with them about basic policy. Talking of shifts, the whole State had surely been evolving. It wasn't so long since the 1916 men were spat at on the streets of Dublin. From then on it was all change to the Free State and later the dismantling by Dev of the then Constitutional position. The State, and the whole island, was moving, but especially the Twenty Six Counties. Why would one newspaper out of all that lot remain untouched? There have been changes since I first became editor, but it was on the basis of wanting to make the paper better, to extend the range, to have it worth reading in Belmullet and Ballymena as well as Ballsbridge. Donal Foley was appointed News Editor shortly after I became editor and he brought a great feeling for the Irish language, for Gaelic games, for traditional music to the paper. But what all of us wanted was to make it a better newspaper, and the Board provided the money and the encouragement.

- DM: Would this be under the label “commercial interest” rather than “ideological” interest?
- DG: No, we were journalists. We worked to improve the paper, — and we enjoyed ourselves. The Board, by the way, was always conscious that what they were at was standing as guardians over a good newspaper. The content of the paper, the dignity and the integrity of the paper, always came first.
- RK: Two small points. In the sixties there were two injections of new blood, as it were; firstly, the access given to women journalists and, secondly, in 1965 you appointed a resident Northern Editor (Fergus Pyle) — an unprecedented move by a newspaper from the Republic. In these respects you broke new ground in Irish journalism.
- DG: And isn't it an appalling commentary on all of us in the Twenty-Six Counties that it should be so remarkable for us to have a full time office in Belfast. I had had this in mind for some time, but Robin Kinahan, later the Chairman of the Ulster Bank, wrote to me enquiring how it was that Northern news got into the paper mostly when it concerned a rise in unemployment, or some particularly virulent outbreak on the part of a politician. He was right. All Irish newspapers had been largely sleeping for decades. We began to give a good coverage to Stormont, which surprised a lot of people in the North. Several Belfast journalists poo-pooed the idea of our covering Stormont in the same way that we covered the Dail. “There is nothing coming out of this place” we were told. “Its not much more than a County Council.” Perhaps not many people eventually read it, but we were determined to have it.
- DM: Were your sales in the North affected by that?
- DG: All this wasn't done to sell more in the North. The aim, was, if I can put it crudely, equally to show the so-and-so's down below what was going on.
- RK: Did you see the decision to report on Stormont as a *de facto* recognition that it was a legitimate Parliament? Or was it more that you felt we in the South didn't fully acknowledge that the Border was there separating the two and thus preventing a United Ireland?
- DG: It was part of our thing to say: this is a paper for the whole of Ireland. Stormont was an Assembly of Irishmen and women debating on Irish soil. We were inviting people to read what they had to say. It was a slice of Irish life.
- RK: Perhaps we could move to another theme — that of the press and public accountability. I suppose you could say that in the minds of most people the press tries to render the public representatives — political, clerical etc — accountable to the people. But some people turn this back on the journalists and say, all right but who are you accountable to? We elect our politicians but who elected you? What gives you the right to have this hegemonic hold over the means of communication, and to tell us who to vote for? We respect the fact that you uncover malpractice and injustice, but isn't there a danger that you might reserve for yourself a kind of elitist power to determine how people think and how they vote? How would you react to this kind of objection?
- DG: John Healy often comes out with this chestnut that we are elected every day the customer puts down his 45p. If not we don't exist. That's a fairly crude answer to what you are saying, but I think a paper that does not serve a community does not survive. A lot of people resent their newspaper — from time to time — and you can let them vent their feelings by printing their letters to the editor. In extreme cases they go to their lawyers. I would like to see a Press Council or an Ombudsman to give the populace a sense that newspapers can be made more accountable than they are.
- RK: John Horgan also raises this in his article on “The Press: Credibility and Accountability” in this *Crane Bag* issue. Could you expand on your view of what such a Press Council might entail?
- DG: I have been at this for many years. Michael Mills was appointed general Ombudsman and I can't think of a better person for Press Ombudsman. I would very much like to see a Press Council. Mind you, I don't think that Press Councils in other countries have been entirely successful, but at least there is

something there that the angry person, or the person whose privacy has been intruded on or feels they have been done down can go and have his case heard and attempt to get some restitution. I see no reason at all why it cannot be done. It should be done, naturally, not by the Government, but by the newspapers themselves. A few years ago there was a debate going on this subject and something started with the Dublin Newspaper Managers Association and perhaps the provincial proprietors too. I don't know why it didn't continue. I think it is right that there should be a Press Council. I don't think it will do all that some critics of newspapers think it will do, but I'm entirely for it.

RK: Should it include radio and TV?

DG: I believe there may be a legal difficulty about that. The Broadcasting Act would have to be re-drafted, but I see no reason why the broadcaster should not come in too.

RK: Of course, the whole question of the moral role of the press came up recently in relation to the Amendment Debate, where some people felt the media were representing a minority viewpoint and were not sufficiently attentive to the so called 'moral majority'.

DM: Bishop Cathal Daly specifically criticised the media and continues to do so. You published an article by John Horgan in *The Irish Times* about this. What is your own view?

DG: We in our paper wrote as most of us felt. We gave space to every possible view we could. We didn't sit and count letters pro and anti, but someone on the radio once gave the number of inches of column space of letters published by the three papers and we were streets ahead. We went out of our way to give everything we could. In the last weeks of the campaign many of the pro-amendment people were so convinced that they were going to win, that they often didn't bother to give our statements. One day I said to Conor O'Clery, the News Editor "do you realise we haven't had a single thing from one of those pro-Amendment groups today?". He said nothing had come in that day although we had telephoned them. They

had nothing, because they were away in a hack, as they thought. One of the things that the pro-Amendment people dodged was its effect on the North, something of which I was very conscious. Now I know that Paisley and his people would be as anti-abortion – in most cases – as the Catholic clergy, but what would strike the Unionists was that, when the main protestant churches made it clear that they wished this amendment had never taken place, no notice was taken of them at all. Illogical or not, this was another brick in the wall of partition.

DM: Most people who are reading this won't have much idea about what an editor does. And particularly *The Irish Times*, which has, I gather, a very unique set up. Can you explain the way things work in *The Irish Times*?

DG: Editorial conditions in *The Irish Times* are unique, certainly in my experience. Let's just take one simple aspect. The Editorial department gets an annual budget. We spent it as sensibly as we can. No one queries why we might have four or five men in Strasbourg on a particular day as long as the budget is working out. In other words, the Board has confidence in the people who work for the paper. Another point in which we differ from most papers is this: the size of the paper is decided every day at the editorial conference, by us, not the advertising manager as is done in most newspapers that I know. Again, we work under a general umbrella of an average of so many columns per day over the whole year. Usually by June we are overspent but then the Summer comes and we can re-adjust. But the daily size of the paper, given that it's physically possible, is decided by the Editorial conference in the afternoon. It is a very good paper for journalists to work for.

DM: Who makes up the board?

DG: I haven't the list to hand, but the Chairman is Major T.B. McDowell who first came to us as a business consultant, then stayed on as Managing Director. An enormous amount of the success of the paper in the last twenty years is due to him. Then we have Donal Nevin, James Meenan, James Walmsley, Thekla Beere, Matt Macken, Richard Wood, Professor Weingreen of TCD. Colette Quigley is from Derry, Desmond Neill also

a Northerner. We have a spread of different callings, different types and certainly not all Protestants as they might have been in the past.

DM: On the question of Protestants, do you see yourself having to preserve a particular voice for Protestants?

DG: I don't think Protestants need to be cosseted or that they think of themselves as needing cossetting. This is an Irish newspaper. The Trust articles mention Christian attitudes, not Protestant attitudes. Personally, I see it as a necessity to remind Protestants in the North that they are often not particularly Protestant — not particularly individualist, as in the Orange Order for example. That's a personal view. But, in short, the paper tries to give voice to all elements in our society. One of the points in the Trust Deed is that minorities should be particularly looked after — and to do that they often have to be given disproportionate space to the numbers.

DM: When were the articles drawn up?

DG: 1974. They carried on to a great extent what had been the norm for about ten years, for as long as I know *The Irish Times*.

DM: On the question of composition and balance, for years you had a Belfast correspondent, but not for Cork, Galway, Derry?

DG: Michael Finlan is full time in Galway; Cork is Dick Hogan; we don't have a letter from Cork or Galway — as we have from Belfast. It's a different sort of coverage. You could certainly argue that much of the space on Irish affairs in *The Irish Times* goes on Leinster and the East Coast. As far as the Republic is concerned that is. It is to a great extent a city paper. I myself would like to see more country items. I am a great reader of small items in the paper. I'm afraid, when people say it's a Dublin paper the answer is yes, but the people of Galway may read us because Dublin is the seat of power and they want to know everything that's going on in Dublin. It's very different to implement fully everything I have said; we are a paper meant to be read in every corner of Ireland, but we can't guarantee that every corner is covered every day. We would like to do it.

DM: There is a general criticism of the media that

it has a Dublin 4 attitude, that it originates out of a mental attitude which is not representative of the whole of Ireland.

DG: The same probably happens in France, Germany and in Britain. Yes, journalists come from Cork or Mayo or Fermanagh and are easily assimilated into Dublin. (John Healy is an exception. That's why every parish in the country reads him. John hasn't changed his attitudes, he still looks at Dublin as someone up from Curteen Bog or wherever. A very valuable thing.) For myself, when I hear a politician talking about the 'Irish people' I remember Belfast. I was born in Dublin, but my father, a civil servant, brought us North when he joined the northern service in 1922. Our house looked out over a great expanse of fields to Ardoyne. (Its all been built up since). There, in the slump of the Twenties, people from the Bone nearby and Old Park Road, and elsewhere played football, walked their greyhounds and whippets, snared finches, scrapped, copulated under coats or newspapers, and must have been fairly representative of the less well off Orange and Green elements. They were poor, indeed undernourished and deprived. All of this did not strike the mind of a child, but these were the first people outside of the immediate family I was conscious as being the outside world. We in Dublin still haven't done much for them.

RK: On the relationship between the journalists and the people, I'd like to raise a point that Mary Holland mentioned in her talk to the Merriman school — for her one of the differences between working as a journalist in England and in Ireland was that in England there was greater difficulty in having access to public representatives (bishops or MP's etc); whereas in Ireland, and in Dublin in particular, there's a certain group of journalists — mainly political correspondents — who have direct access to public representatives. Often it's in a very off-the-record manner: they meet in pubs or homes, discuss important issues and are privy to confidential information which they might have a certain reluctance to print immediately because of breach of confidence, for fear that they might not get the information next time round. So that, while at one level there is an intimacy of rapport, a flow of information between journalists and public

representatives, on another level this practice could have built into it a certain censorship, a complicity of diffident silence which in the long term doesn't benefit public accountability at large?

DG: You can read complicity into many aspects of life. The lobby system has its dangers, yes. But it can work for journalists as well as against them. It can, for example, give them time to absorb a difficult report which is explained off-the-record. I don't think the lobby system has covered up any great deficiencies or scandals. Journalists still know for which side they work. They are not part of the political structure. To some extent it is a convenience for the politicians and to some extent a convenience for the journalists.

DM: Do you think there is a kind of news management involved in that?

DG: There is a certain trading anyway and it's our job not to let ourselves be managed or mis-managed.

DM: You often get more information in Nesbitts say, than you do from the Garda Press Office . . .

DG: I have largely dropped out of the dining and socialising circle because I always felt that if you have lunch with politician A and you hear that his wife is not at all well you might have qualms about saying what you ought to say about him. The same system goes in London — a book has just been published on the lobby system. I don't think news is perverted.

DM: How would another system work?

DG: We would all just have to dig out our own stories. We might find, if the lobby system were abolished, that in fact politicians, to stay in the headlines, thrust more and more information at us. Its perhaps easy for me to talk, sitting back in the office as I do. I don't have to bring in stories every day. The political people do.

DM: One area of manipulation that people have complained about — the press attitude to Charlie Haughey, particularly during the leadership crisis. A lot of people felt there was news management going on from par-

ticular quarters — which was very successful — but seemed to have missed the real movement within the party.

DG: There was also skilful news management from Haughey's quarter. It seems now that some who were seen as being in the anti-Haughey camp were in fact double agents . . . Haughey's men. If the press on the whole misjudged it, it wasn't merely anti-Haughey prejudice. People in the heart of the Fianna Fail party didn't know the full score. Yes, Haughey can be cranky and offensive in his relations with the press — and also quite the opposite. The fact that a reporter doesn't like a public figure, however, should never influence his judgement on that person's worth. I find Charles Haughey agreeable and have done so over a very long period, also highly competent and I know he has been helpful in cases where there is no political advantage. He is no ogre. He was a fine minister. He has yet to prove himself a fine Taoiseach.

RK: In his article in this issue, "The Tyranny of Images", Michael D. Higgins states that many current affairs correspondents in the media operate as though there are no social or class problems only changing political personalities.

DG: Look, in our political system there are the power-mad, the message boys, and then, too, high-minded men and women devoted to the governing of this country. They are all people of flesh and blood, virtues and frailities. Are we to treat them like automata spouting party dalekspeak. Political coverage cannot be all policies and aims. It has to present the people who are working the system too — or not working it. Michael D. Higgins keeps on saying that and gets a lot of space for saying it. How many European newspapers give as much space to parliamentary reporting as do our Irish papers? How many European newspapers give pages and pages to expositions by economic bodies, such as ESRI? Sometimes we are smothered in reports.

RK: You don't think there is an imbalance in favour of personality politics?

DG: I don't think so. I don't think Michael D. is right. Remember we are reporting and analysing; we are not running a Government;

we are not an academic department of a university. I remind our people now and then that Shakespeare wrote about people and thereby illustrated eternal verities.

DM: But it is more or less time I think that the Irish newspapers did write less in terms of personalities or particular events and more in terms of discussing ideas and ideologies. We are very much limited by following the British tradition of newspapers rather than, say, the French. When you think of the French newspapers they are much more philosophically or ideologically aware.

DG: It depends on which French newspaper you are talking about. Some of them spend most of their time on the activities of the British Royal Family.

RK: *Le Monde? Le Matin? Libération?*

DG: I read *Le Matin*. I have been taking *Libération* for a few weeks now. *Le Monde* is certainly a splendid newspaper, and Beuve-Mery probably the greatest journalist of our time; but I am not sure if we are talking about the same thing. *Le Monde* is not a newspaper as we are, nor is *Die Neue Zuercher Zeitung*. If the town hall was burned down in the middle of Zurich, it would be page two of the NZZ. This is not the sort of newspaper that would be acceptable in Ireland. I keep on worrying about our own paper. Are we becoming an encyclopaedia when we run two or three pages of an ESRI report or such?

RK: What would you call it if not a newspaper?

DG: Well its certainly to a great extent a journal of opinion. Rather than a recorder of events.

RK: In France you have *Le Matin* or *Libération* which are more locally oriented but still contain a strong international perspective. Would you consider them more in the format of a newspaper?

DG: Yes

DM: People make the point that these newspapers are much more concerned than our own with international issues. They are looking at things from global viewpoint rather than a particular regional viewpoint.

DG: Well if you are editing a newspaper in Paris

or Zurich you are much more conscious of the continent and the world around you. We run a page and a half of foreign news every day which is steady stuff.

DM: But you are much less aware of East-West tension, for example.

DG: Yes, we would not carry as many articles (we carry news) as would *Le Monde*, or some of the German papers perhaps, about rising or declining tensions. We would be more an Atlantic paper I suppose, more concerned with the American thing. We have a correspondent Judy Dempsey who goes to Eastern Europe regularly for us. Strangers who come to Dublin, including some Ambassadors, have said that they read our paper and are surprised that it should *pay* (my italics) to carry so much foreign news.

DM: I want to push you a bit on that because on areas where there is an Irish Interest the international news seems to be very good — if you think of Central America or the Philippines. There the Irish public have been able to develop its own analysis. But for other places we rely heavily on UPI and agency reports. I'm thinking of Africa for example.

DG: We have a good regular correspondent Kane-Berman in South Africa. Good contacts in other countries. Dennis Kennedy who worked in Abyssinia for a few years makes fairly regular trips to that continent. I suppose our Foreign Staff would say that if we gave them another page a day we could have extensive coverage all the time. We have people on our list whom we share with the Observer or some other newspaper. This is very common among all the newspapers of the world.

RK: Like Robert Fisk in the Lebanon?

DG: That comes to us through the London *Times* service. But we have had our own men in there too — at least three have been out for us and more than once. In the Thirties and Forties there used to be the correspondent in his trench coat and turned-down hat. You left him in a place for years at a time. The tendency in all newspapers now is to have someone who knows the area well on your staff, who goes to the particular country or area for a month or two, comes back and

acts as specialist in the office, going out again when some interesting news comes up. We cannot do this on the scale that the *Times* does, but we do it in our own way. Conor O'Clery, News Editor was twice in Afghanistan. He learned Russian and is dying to get back to Russia, but at the moment there isn't much money.

RK: The USA?

DG: Sean Cronin is full time in Washington.

DM: What do you think of the call by Sean MacBride — which he has been making for years — for a news agency which would be independent of UPI?

DG: I worked on the agency that he founded for two years, in 1952 and 1953. If the Irish News Agency had continued, we would have been well established as a reliable source of news from a country that does not provide sensations every day. Then when the troubles broke out in the North our copy would have been acceptable from the start. We would have had instant access to newspapers and other outlets throughout the world.

RK: Why did the Irish News Agency fail?

DG: MacBride had the right intentions but it should have been set up with the newspapers or by them. Of course, they weren't interested at the time. From the beginning, too, there was disgruntlement from some journalists who had much of the foreign correspondence tied up. They thought they were going to lose money, so they were against it. Today proprietors who turned their backs on the news agency or who were lukewarm, would be only too glad to have it going. A well run news agency would cover what we call the hard news: the courts, the running story of the Dail; markets and other basic information. Newspapers would be freer than to use their correspondents for special treatment of events, for all the follow-up stuff. It would save the proprietors a lot of money. And I do not believe one journalist would be put out of work. At one time we tried to sell such a scheme to the NUJ and guaranteed to take on anyone who felt his job was threatened by such a scheme but it came to nothing unfortunately. It couldn't last as it was, but it

trained many very good journalists who are still working in Dublin.

DM: That's one side of it. But the other side has developed more recently with UNESCO and its aim to get a Third World news agency going. People say Ireland's traditional neutrality is very weak, but when we do have the information — as in the case of the Philippines and Central America — or the Palestinian issue in Lebanon, we do tend to have our own critical opinion and it's often quite different from that in Britain. Do you think this would be more developed if we had better access to a less biased, less ideological news agency?

DG: Well, I don't know where you would find them. There is no such thing, I keep on saying, as absolute objectivity in reporting. We all do our best against our own educational, religious or racial or social backgrounds.

RK: I would like to quote here a passage from the report of the *International Commission for the Study of Communication problems* (1980), of which Sean MacBride was the director. It said in the foreword: "With the coming of a new world communication order, each people must be able to learn from the others"; it goes on to call for the reduction of third world dependency on the big developed countries (and I suppose Ireland as a small nation would fit into this former category); the recognition of communication as a basic right; and the democratisation and development of a comprehensive national communication policy. Would that link up with what the Irish News Agency was trying to do?

DG: I imagine it would mean a policy of getting across what they were trying to do as a country to other nations, which is what we were trying to do. We were trying to break this famous paper wall. These countries you mention are trying for self expression — in other words, to have their development recorded round the world. It doesn't always work out like that. You can send news to people, but you can't make them print it. But with a steady flow of news, some of it eventually gets in. If people aren't interested in a certain part of the world, it's very hard to make them interested. Look what we have been trying to do about Partition. How far have we got? I go to France and a pro-

fessor asks me why is it that the North of Ireland is fighting the South of Ireland? Where is the actual fighting? Have you invaded the North or has the North invaded you? God Almighty, it's very discouraging when you try to educate the world!

DM: What we could do with more of here is more information — particularly with international and multi-national investment here — more information about the track record of multi-nationals. We don't tend to get that in our newspapers. Why?

DG: You get it when they get into trouble.

DM: But you tend to get more of it in America don't you?

DG: Muckraking in the decent sense?

DM: Yes, the Karen Silkwood kind of story which eventually lost the company, Kerr-McGee, millions of dollars . . .

DG: You are saying that we are less aggressive. We see here some of the best American examples — Woodward and Bernstein — but to read American newspapers I get exactly the opposite impression. To my mind they are very flaccid, very dull. Ours at least are lively, if sometimes you think over personalised.

RK: Besides, American newspapers are generally conservative and pro-establishment when it comes to the crunch.

DG: There is this new paper called USA Today. I haven't read it enough to see where it's going.

RK: I wonder how many people in America read it?

DG: Well, it's run by Gannet and they have transmission by satellite and what not. It's poor enough stuff, though technically very well done. It has colour and it is well sub edited, very neat, though I can't see any bite to it myself.

RK: You find in America lots of smaller critical journals, like the Nation for instance, which are radical in intent but which have a small circulation and depend on private subscriptions. This raises the problem of whether small critical journals in our own

country — the Crane Bag included — can ultimately have any real impact on public or popular consciousness. The opposite extreme to the small critical journal is, of course, the mass-circulation tabloids. I'm thinking particularly here of the British tabloids like the Sun and the Daily Mail, which have a huge distribution in Ireland today.

DG: The Mirror is soaring ahead too. They cost much less than our papers. And price has a lot to do with their success. Again, maybe there is a great deal of the flippant and the superficial in the Irish character? We don't want to wade through a full newspaper? A bit of fun, a bit of racing . . .

RK: Is there pressure on your paper to follow suit?

DG: Certainly not. It is better to do what you do well or give up. The price of the English papers is one thing. Then there is VAT. All Irish newspapers are in dire trouble at the moment. Mostly losing money. Would people buy the *Mirror* at 35p. I doubt it.

DM: For a while there was a tax on the British newspapers at point of entry. Are you in favour of this?

DG: It's still the case. But if you print 2,000,000 *Mirrors* or whatever, you can run off another 100,000 for next to nothing.

DM: Do you believe in some form of protection?

RK: Would you ban them?

DG: No. A number of years ago a Canadian Ambassador came to me saying that they were thinking of putting restrictions on the import of American publications — daily papers, *Time/Life* and so on, and would there be any support in Ireland for that and would we think of doing it to English papers? No.

DM: But would there be a case for positive discrimination in favour of Irish newspapers, given that they are so critical for democracy and the functioning of the country.

DG: Our governments have been disgraceful in relation to the Irish newspapers. Garret FitzGerald, the present incumbent, had all the facts and figures given to him by our

managements. Then four editors went to see him to tell him that all our jobs were at risk. We asked why an Irish Government was taxing knowledge. In Germany VAT is only 7%. In England, as we know, nil. We asked him how he and the other public figures would get on if they had to depend for political coverage on the Mirror or the Sun. How many of his speeches would even be noticed? What would happen to political life and debate in that case? And remember that we give proportionately more space, to my knowledge, to parliamentary activities and to politicians than any other papers in Europe. We asked him to be careful not to throw this away. But he has to find £25 million a year he says and where is he going to get that?

- DM: How do you react to Garret FitzGerald's criticism of the media coverage during the European elections?
- DG: Well, he was an ass in that instance. We had three supplements of 4 pages each. We spent thousands of pounds and pages of running news on it. We had 5 people in Strasbourg on one occasion. No extra sales, no advertising, we were just doing the job of reporting that we are there for. I didn't see much in the English papers of that.
- DM: On the role of advertising, in an article in this issue of the *Crane Bag*, John Horgan says that press advertising directed by Government departments and semi-state bodies has on occasion quite deliberately been used as an instrument of Government policy. Its political dimension has been so much taken for granted, in fact, that opposition complaints about it, when they have been made at all, have been comparatively muted. The inescapable implication of this is that all the major parties have, in government, exercised some measure of political control over this indirect subsidy to the press.
- DG: All I can say is that I haven't come across any direct compelling evidence of this on any paper I've worked for. I do know and I do remember from Dail reports and from talking to newspapermen down the country, that in certain areas, government A is said to be unfair to newspaper B because it isn't of the appropriate line in politics. Yes, there have been examples in the past. I can't
- recall details. I don't remember in my time any paper I worked for campaigning against the government of the day not giving it advertisements. Government advertising in our day isn't very big, it's mostly legal notices in the back of the paper. During election campaigns all parties now tend to go for the Sundays and the big sellers. We got very very little in the last elections.
- DM: It's not a major lobby then?
- DG: I can't think so, but you would need to ask Willy O'Hanlon of the provincial press or Liam Bergin or someone with a long memory. And I do wish that all parties would give lots of advertisements to the Irish Times. We'd be delighted to take them.
- DM: On the coverage of the recent Euro-elections, there was no coverage of Sinn Fein candidates — particularly Noonan who obviously made speeches around Dublin — but no coverage of them?
- DG: I don't think that's right. Maybe there wasn't enough. The Workers Party got a fair run. There was no intention on our part to see the Sinn Fein candidate done down. Maybe he was less active than he might have been. The big parties trundle in material to you day in day out, tell you where their main speakers are going to be on such and such a day; they see that there is a steady flow of information, and it may be that we didn't work hard enough to winkle out the people who hadn't the large organisation. I'd accept that criticism with reservations.
- DM: You wouldn't think that there may be a bias within journalists — particularly in the NUJ — against Sinn Fein, and that they would be reluctant to cover it!
- DG: I wouldn't think so at all — against either SF or the WP. Most journalists, no matter what party they are for, are conscious of being journalists. There was a time when people were much more party-committed.
- DM: Gerry Adams wrote an article in Irish for *The Irish Times* lately; would he have been published so readily in English?
- DG: He's had a fair amount of space, from us in his time. Yes I think he would have been

- published in English. That article came in in the normal way. Jim Downey, a deputy editor, looks after most of the Irish articles. This came in, commissioned by someone in that department and was put in the paper.
- DM: Your coverage of Irish language matters — as another minority — are you satisfied with it?
- DG: About 6 months ago we started to improve our coverage. We have an Irish article every day now. They are meant to be not just a gesture of good will but worthwhile stuff in the paper.
- DM: Well I certainly read them and people I know read them, but they are largely within the educational context — either written by teachers or about the Leaving Certificate Irish or something like that.
- DG: Or by Gerry Adams. I'm sure it could be improved.
- RK: Fintan O'Toole, in his article in this issue argues that there is a disjunction in this country between the press and the arts, a split between two forms of writing and thinking which he says has a deeply conservative effect. I quote: "It's good for those who have a stake in the world as it is, to have a clear and rigid distinction between fact and imagination; journalism objectively recording the one (the facts), art inhabiting and inhabited by the other. Such distinctions allow the world to be apprehended in a static way as fixed, univocal and unthreatened. But our distinction between art and journalism is a historic rather than an eternal one, forged in the great bourgeois revolution, a child of the industrial revolution. For the new order of the industrial revolution, the murky areas between fact and imagination, journalism and art are understandably dangerous". I suppose the basic thrust of O'Toole's argument is that the separation of these two kinds of writing inhibits the interplay between critical imagination and political reporting . . .
- DG: He is saying there isn't enough original writing isn't he?
- RK: I think he is saying there isn't enough imaginative writing or critical writing capable of addressing the ideological content of our social discourse. Do you see a separation between journalism and the arts?
- DG: Journalism is not an art. You can be funny and say it's an addiction.
- RK: Well, Jonathan Swift might not have agreed that journalism isn't an art.
- DG: I think that O'Toole is saying there isn't enough creative thinking and writing in the newspapers. You couldn't have enough of it I'm sure. Some of the best journalism comes from poets and writers. I think of Paddy Kavanagh who started a column during the last war for the *Irish Press*. It was good as a newspaper column and it was also the working of a very individual mind.
- RK: You have Anthony Cronin in *The Irish Times* at present?
- DG: Yes, he's writing every week for us. I suppose we do get into a rut. And is it fair to ask how well academics and other intellectuals are doing in giving the country a lead? All of us could do with fresh ideas. Tim Pat for example started buying short stories from young people for his paper, a splendid idea. I wish we had done it.
- DM: That was the David Marcus page?
- DG: Yes. Many people have been published there who had hardly written before. Splendid achievement.
- RK: You published occasional poems of course in *The Irish Times* and you ran a remarkable Summer series of short stories under the direction of Caroline Walsh. Surely, the success of that kind of project encourages a greater rapprochement between 'creative' and 'critical' writing?
- DG: Yes. But we don't publish enough. I said recently "we need more poets in the place". Not that there aren't excellent writers in newspapers in Ireland today. Perhaps we are more conformist today than we were say thirty or forty years ago. The old journalists had, perhaps, something that we have lost to a great extent, the to-hell-with-the-lot-of-you attitude!
- DM: Surely journalism is getting more and more professionalised. With degrees in the subject and in media communications studies. All of

which aim to create a more critical consciousness. You are suggesting that they are perhaps more establishment?

DG: I am saying that in their own lives, journalists are leading more conformist lives now.

DM: Do you think that these media courses are institutionalising people too much?

DG: I wouldn't blame the media courses.

RK: Are you thinking of the media courses given in Rathmines College or the NIHE?

DG: No. I think John Horgan, for example, is doing a very useful job.

DM: They aim to be critical. But are you consciously trying to hire people who have been through this kind of critical media evaluation courses?

DG: No. You're always trying to hire people who can write and report well. They may have been through a media course, they may not. Fathers and mothers today think of journalism as they used to think of the bank or the Civil Service. There are far more university students in journalism now. The graduate is lacking in the experience and craft of the reporter who went straight into a newspaper at 18 years of age. But he or she, by dint of academic studies, will be trained to pick up things quickly. That is ideally. We don't have a policy of favouring any category. If we have a vacancy we advertise.

DM: What about AnCO courses?

DG: When we are hiring a reporter now, a committee of three senior journalists interviews all applicants. We don't look for any particular courses or diploma, though Rathmines or NIHE qualifications give a considerable advantage. What we are looking for basically is a person with a sense of curiosity, a sense of wonder even, and a person who knows that journalists don't keep banking hours. That's important. Some aspirants fall away when you tell them that if they are on your staff, they mightn't find it easy to arrange to go to the Theatre next Tuesday, say, because that morning the News Editor might have them in a car and careering towards Kerry or Antrim.

DM: What about positive discrimination in favour of women in hiring?

DG: I personally believe in positive discrimination in favour of women at this stage.

DM: Does *The Irish Times* actually exercise such a policy?

DG: No. It would be the best candidate, obviously, who gets the job. I think women have proved themselves above all as reporters and writers. But the interesting thing to look forward to is — when will *The Irish Times* or some other paper have a woman as editor? It may not be so far away.

DM: There are women editors of magazines — *Image* and so on; but it has usually been confined to a particular area of 'womens' issues.

DG: Some of those appointments may be jobs that would not take seven days a week. To be editor of a daily newspaper is a seven-day a week job.

RK: Last question; a quote from Tim Pat Coogan — "Douglas Gageby is the most outstanding editor of his time". Do you agree?

DG: My answer is: go to Hell.

DM: Is there any final comment you would like to make?

DG: Yes, I think we've got to remember — what I said to the Merriman school — that everything done in the newspaper is done watching the clock. We are always thinking: if we had more time we would do this differently. Let us all be conscious of the fact that newspapers are produced in a hurry, even in a frenzy; so our mistakes are there daily for everyone to see. Not so with doctors, lawyers, civil servants, academics, even. So don't shoot the editor.