

Smyllie, Robert Maire

by John Horgan

Smyllie, Robert Maire (1893–1954), journalist and editor of the *Irish Times*, was born 20 March 1893 at Hill St., Shettleton, Glasgow, eldest among four sons and one daughter of Robert Smyllie (*fl.* 1900), a presbyterian, and Elisabeth Follis, originally from Cork. His Scottish father was a printer who at the time of his son's birth was working in Sligo town, and had married there (20 July 1892). The Scottish register of births is a useful corrective to the errors propagated by his admirers and by Smyllie's own paper, suggesting that he was born a year later to parents who lived in Scotland and that his father was a famous journalist. In time, however, Smyllie senior was to become proprietor and editor of the unionist *Sligo Times*. His son went to Sligo grammar school in 1906, and thence to TCD in 1911.

After only two years in TCD, the young Smyllie's love of adventure prompted an unscheduled departure from higher education in 1913. In 1914 he was acting as tutor to the children of an American family in Germany when he was embroiled in the outbreak of the first world war and was interned in the Ruhleben camp near Berlin. Released on the cessation of hostilities, he managed to secure a personal interview with Lloyd George at the Paris peace conference and, on the strength of this, a permanent position with the *Irish Times* in 1920. He immediately won the confidence of the editor, John Healy (qv), to the extent that both men participated in secret but unsuccessful attempts to broker a solution to the Anglo–Irish war of independence.

Healy's policy of transforming the *Irish Times* from its original role as the voice of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy into first the organ of liberal southern unionism, and finally an enthusiastic if critical legitimising force in the Irish Free State, was one that was endorsed and prosecuted with zeal by Smyllie. In 1927 he was responsible for a potentially explosive news report in which he exclusively revealed the outline of a draft government which would include both Labour and Fianna Fáil TDs. Although Fianna Fáil's accession to power did not take place until 1932, and then in a slightly different context, Smyllie's work is key evidence of the volatility of politics in the early years of the state's existence.

In the same year Smyllie inaugurated a new feature in the *Irish Times* – the 'Irishman's diary' – which has survived many incumbents and remains a feature of that newspaper. His knowledge of languages – and of German in particular, which he had learned while interned in 1914–18 – encouraged Healy to send him on numerous foreign assignments for the paper. His reports on the rise of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s were particularly prescient, and his experience of this phenomenon at first hand left him with a permanent antipathy to the movement and its adherents.

When Healy died in 1934, Smyllie was the natural choice as his successor. He inherited not only the editorial chair, but also the valuable position of Irish correspondent of *The Times* (London), which provided a not inconsiderable supplement to the very modest wages then common in the Dublin newspaper industry. In contrast to his somewhat self-effacing predecessor, he instituted an editorial regime characterised by somewhat Bohemian attitudes and a disregard for formality, and the establishment of a semi-permanent salon in Fleet St.'s Palace bar, presided over by himself, and frequented by journalists and literary figures of the day. This generated much of the material for his weekly column, over the by-line 'Nichevo', which he now inaugurated in order to free the 'Irishman's diary' for a new incumbent. One of the successors he appointed to that role was Patrick Campbell (qv). Campbell, later Lord Glenavy and a popular figure on British television, despite (or in part because of) an horrendous stutter, was an example of Smyllie's ability to choose unlikely people who made an extraordinary success of their journalism. Another inspired choice was the civil servant Brian O'Nolan (qv), whose column 'Cruiskeen lawn', originally written in Irish but then also in English and in a medley of other languages including Latin and Greek, was to delight its readers for several decades.

One of the first political challenges he encountered was his paper's attitude to the Spanish civil war. At a time when Irish catholicism was enthusiastically – and sometimes vehemently – pro-Franco, Smyllie ensured that the reportage in his paper was both balanced and fair, at least until the point at which pressure from advertisers forced him to withdraw the paper's gifted young reporter, Lionel Fleming, from that conflict. More conscious than most Irish editors of the nature and seriousness of the impending European crisis, he carried a series of news reports and editorial warnings which earned him the order of the White Lion of Czechoslovakia (1939), one of that country's most prestigious awards. With the outbreak of hostilities, however, he now found himself in conflict with authorities nearer home, specifically the censorship regime for print media set up by the minister for the coordination of defensive measures, Frank Aiken (qv). The objective necessity for such a regime, in the light of Ireland's finely poised policy of military neutrality, was continuously undermined by the obtuseness and narrow-mindedness of some of the censors, with whom Smyllie waged war both in the pages of his newspaper and in private correspondence. The coolness of his relationship with the editor of the *Irish Independent*, the staunchly catholic Frank Geary (qv), during this period, made the opposition of both editors to the censorship less effective than it might have been.

After the second world war, Smyllie's views in two different areas – one domestic, the other foreign – helped to stamp certain characteristics on the *Irish Times*. The first was his constant opposition to censorship. This found expression primarily in a semi-permanent campaign waged against the Censorship of Publications Board and its frequent banning of Irish writers. It led to the publication of a major controversy on the letters page of the newspaper in 1950, which was subsequently

published as a booklet, *The liberal ethic*. This was accompanied by a sharply critical attitude to the role of the catholic church, particularly in the following year, when the minister for health, Dr Noel Browne (qv), resigned in the midst of a controversy about the introduction of a national health scheme for mothers and children which was opposed by both the catholic bishops and the medical profession. Smyllie's newspaper now commented editorially – although the article was reputed not to have been written by Smyllie himself, but by a catholic member of the staff – that the catholic church was the effective government of the country. This, characteristically, did not unduly hamper his relationship with Dr John Charles McQuaid (qv), the catholic archbishop of Dublin, who invited him to dinner every year to discuss matters of mutual concern.

The second was a wariness about, and hostility towards, American foreign policy. American diplomats in Dublin were even driven to complain of his pro-communist attitudes during the Korean war, which were expressed even more vigorously in private than in his editorials. Although at this time the *Irish Times* was increasingly being read by an educated catholic middle class, especially those involved in the professions and in the arts, this new-found popularity seemed to be incapable of being translated into circulation growth of any significance: in 1950 the paper's circulation was still below 50,000, compared with that of the *Irish Independent* (220,000) and the *Irish Press* (150,000).

His health, however, was not good, and this may have in part prompted the adoption of a quieter lifestyle after the war, when he moved from the large house in Pembroke Park, Dublin, which he had occupied for most of his time as editor, to Delgany, Co. Wicklow. As he did not drive, this made him dependent on public transport, so that he became a less constant presence in the newspaper's office in D'Olier St., and the newspaper to some extent moved into the doldrums.

His ill-health increased in later years, leading to ever more frequent absences from his editorial chair, but he clung tenaciously to his position in spite of attempts by the newspaper's management to curb his powers, particularly in budgetary matters. He died on 11 September 1954 of heart failure.

He married (1925) Kathlyn Reid (1895–1974), eldest of three daughters of a Co. Meath landowner. They had no children. A portrait in oils is in the office of the editor of the *Irish Times* at D'Olier St., Dublin 2.

Vivian Mercier, 'The Irish Times', *The Bell*, ix, no. 4 (1945), 290–97; *Ir. Times*, 12 Apr. 1951; Dublin diocesan archives, McQuaid to Felici, 15 Apr. 1951, AB8/B/XVIII, MCS; *Ir. Times*, *Times*, 12 Sept. 1954; Brian Inglis, *West Briton* (1962); J. Bowyer Bell, 'Ireland and the Spanish civil war, 1936–1939', *Studia Hib.*, ix (1969), 137–64;

Brian Inglis, *Downstart* (1990); Tony Gray, *Mr Smyllie, Sir* (1991); Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Censorship in Ireland 1939–45: neutrality, politics and society* (1996), 160–69; Donal O'Donovan, *Little old man cut short* (1998), 103; John Horgan, *Noel Browne, passionate outsider* (2000), 152; id., *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (2001), 37–39, 44–45, 48, 62

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