

**'The shouts of vanished crowds': Literacy, Orality, and Popular
Politics in the Campaign to Repeal the Act of Union
in Ireland, 1840–48**

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When seeking to explain why so many people he met during his 1844 tour of Ireland supported Daniel O'Connell's campaign to repeal the Act of Union, the English journalist, historian, and occasional travel writer James Grant identified two causes.¹ Half a century before the recording of sound, Grant told his readers: 'You will scarcely meet in Ireland a peasant who has not heard Mr O'Connell speak.' He went on to outline a second factor: the prevalence of

Repeal newspapers, and repeal tracts and pamphlets. These are read to such of them as are themselves unable to read. In many of the southern towns there are repeal reading rooms, where the most zealous repeal papers are regularly read aloud to listening groups, unable to read for themselves. In those rural districts where the population is too thinly scattered to admit of establishing repeal reading rooms, the practice is for the peasantry, in each parish, to assemble every Sunday afternoon in the most convenient place in the parish, to hear the repeal weekly journals read [...]. In this way the peasantry of Ireland are systematically instructed in the principles of

I would like to thank Professor Roy F. Foster, Dr Guy Beiner, and Dr Mike P. McCabe, for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ James Grant (1802–1879), future editor of the *Morning Advertiser* (1850–71) among other titles, was a devout Calvinist, and the author of more than forty books, including accounts of travelling in Ireland and France. See D. M. Griffiths, 'Grant, James (1802–1879)', *ODNB* <doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/11263>.

repeal; and hence the amazing progress which that question has made.²

This passage illustrates three important points: the paucity of newspapers in pre-Famine Irish society, the widespread levels of illiteracy among the peasantry, and the manner in which information entered the public sphere in rural society, namely by public reading from newspapers.³ The production and recitation of texts was a realization of hierarchical relations of power that structured pre-Famine Irish society.⁴ Nineteenth-century Ireland was a predominantly rural and bilingual society, albeit one that was coming to the end of a century of dramatic language shift.⁵ This was a process that affected every section of society in most areas, and which meant that English had become the language of print, literacy, and commerce, as well as of popular politics, as access to the written word spread down the social ladder.⁶

In his study of the social memory of the 1798 rebellion, Guy Beiner notes that despite the rich oral culture for which Ireland is renowned, oral history has not flourished in the field of Irish historical studies.⁷ The same might be said for the study of orality, which has tended to play second fiddle to studies of textual traditions, if only as a reflection of the necessarily text-based archival record.⁸ The ‘oral’ nature of Irish-language

² [James Grant], *Impressions of Ireland and the Irish, 1844*, 2 vols (London: Cunningham, 1844), II, 199–200.

³ In 1841, 47% of the population over the age of five claimed to be able to read, although this statistic belied considerable regional variations and levels of functional literacy. See Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society* (London: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), p. 13.

⁴ Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland, 1750–1850* (London: Lilliput Press, 1997), pp. 186–87.

⁵ Peter K. Fallon, *Printing, Literacy, and Education in Eighteenth Century Ireland* (Lampeter: Mellen, 2005), pp. 2–4.

⁶ Niall Ó Ciosáin, ‘Print and Irish, 1570–1900: An Exception among the Celtic Languages?’, *Radharc: A Journal of Irish and Irish-American Studies*, 5–7 (2004–06), 73–106 (p. 75); Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, ‘Popular Reading Practise’, in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006–), IV: *The Irish Book in English, 1800–1891*, ed. by James H. Murphy (2011), pp. 211–39 (p. 239).

⁷ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), p. 17.

⁸ Nessa Cronin, Séan Crosson, and John Eastlake, ‘“The Sea of Orality”: An Introduction to Orality and Modern Irish Culture’, in *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality*

culture was compounded by a lack of published material in Irish, as most Irish-language texts survived (if at all) only in manuscript (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, p. 215). Helen O’Connell has written persuasively of the manner in which ‘the Irish language came to be equated with orality in the nineteenth century’, and argues that ‘Irish was constructed in terms of orality and illiteracy in order to assert the rationality of the English-language literary discourse’ represented by the literature of ‘improvement’.⁹ Moreover, she notes that both the supporters of Daniel O’Connell’s Repeal Association, and those members of the nationalist intelligentsia associated with the *Nation* newspaper and popularly dubbed ‘Young Ireland’, were rooted in ‘improvement concepts of “self-reliance”, literacy, and sobriety, which were intent on the dislodging of the illiterate ideology of the Irish peasantry’.¹⁰ Although there is a lack of data on literacy rates prior to 1841, as Niall Ó Ciosáin has argued, ‘it is clear that by 1800 the culture of the majority, while still predominantly oral, was no longer exclusively so.’¹¹ Despite the preponderance of illiteracy and the expense of purchasing newspapers in an endemically poor society, by the time Daniel O’Connell’s campaign to repeal the Act of Union in the 1840s gathered steam, people were increasingly frequenting reading rooms, buying or renting newspapers, reading newspapers in public houses, or listening to others read newspapers aloud.¹²

It is not my intended purpose in this article to interrogate the more arcane interpretations of postcolonial theorists as to the ramifications of orality in Ireland for the development of modernity in the *longue durée*.¹³ Rather, I wish to examine the manner in which nationalist activists in the

and Modern Irish Culture, ed. by Nessa Cronin, Séan Crosson, and John Eastlake (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 3–12 (p. 3).

⁹ Helen O’Connell, ‘Improved English: And the Silence of Irish’, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 30 (2004), 13–19 (p. 13).

¹⁰ Helen O’Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 160.

¹¹ Niall Ó Ciosáin, ‘Oral Culture, Literacy, and Reading, 1800–50’, in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, IV, 173–91 (p. 173).

¹² Marie-Louise Legg, *Newspapers and Nationalism: The Irish Provincial Press, 1850–1892* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), pp. 65–66.

¹³ For just such an approach, see David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

immediate pre-Famine period relied on a developing and vibrant literary culture. This was a culture that interacted with popular orality on a day-to-day basis through the dissemination of newspapers and other reading materials in dedicated reading rooms in a society that was ‘increasingly Anglicized and literate’.¹⁴ This, it should be stressed, was an interaction of both literacy *and* orality.¹⁵ As Denis Donohue has remarked, ‘orality and literacy are never mutually exclusive’, and the historian must be wary of constructing them in a falsely antagonistic relationship.¹⁶ Nonetheless, to study orality in the early nineteenth century must be done in the light of Penny Fielding’s observation that

the self-evident nature of orality is itself based on a paradox: on the one hand, the oral is something everyone knows, it is shared experience, communal knowledge, the wisdom of the people. On the other hand, the oral cannot really be known at all, because of its habit of vanishing without record into the past.¹⁷

Historians of the Repeal campaign have placed much emphasis on the spectacular series of ‘monster’ meetings as demonstrating increased levels of political participation in the pre-Famine period.¹⁸ These were a series of more than forty mass rallies organized by Daniel O’Connell’s

¹⁴ K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 457.

¹⁵ For some, ‘the evidence on which the orality–literacy split rests is thin and dated’ (see Jonathan Sterne, ‘The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality’, *Canadian Journal of Communications*, 36 (2011), 207–25 (p. 220)). Walter J. Ong’s pioneering *Orality and Literacy* (1982), which has done much to frame debates on orality and literacy, does not deal with Ireland, other than to note in passing that Ireland is ‘a country in which every region preserves massive residual orality’ (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 69).

¹⁶ Denis Donohue, ‘Orality, Literacy, and Their Discontents’, *New Literary History*, 27 (1997), 145–59 (p. 151).

¹⁷ Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 4.

¹⁸ Oliver MacDonagh, *O’Connell: The Life of Daniel O’Connell, 1775–1847* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991), pp. 501–10; Patrick M. Geoghegan, *Liberator: The Life and Death of Daniel O’Connell, 1830–1847* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010), pp. 133–65.

Loyal National Repeal Association (LNRA) during the summer of 1843.¹⁹ The work of Gary Owens has done much to illuminate the dramaturgy deployed during these carefully stage-managed processions, designed to demonstrate the physical numbers who supported Repeal in an atmosphere reminiscent of both pilgrimage and summer fair, to the extent that he denominated the monster meetings as ‘nationalism without words’ — above all a spectacle of O’Connellite strength in numbers.²⁰ The Repeal press abounded with descriptions of the orderly nature and sobriety of the crowds that attended, although one (admittedly hostile) witness, *Times* correspondent Sir William Howard Russell, would later describe how, in response to O’Connell’s speechifying, ‘the men yelled and danced with rage; the women squealed and clapped their hands. The vast multitude [...] moved and moaned like a wild beast in agony.’²¹ Moreover, these occasions were accompanied by both music and the performance of ballads: Benjamin Disraeli’s brother Ralph, an equally hostile witness to a ‘monster’ meeting, described the attendance of temperance bands and the

¹⁹ The meetings were dubbed ‘monster’ meetings by the *Times* on 1 July 1843, presumably due to the size of the crowds that attended, although it has been suggested that the term is a corruption of the French word ‘monstre’, meaning ‘mass’. O’Connell publicly embraced the term: ‘Why, it is a monster meeting; but it is not a monster of wickedness or vice — of drunkenness or riot; it is a monster in the purity of its motives — in the innocence of its conduct [...]. I thank the writer for the phrase “monster meeting.”’ See ‘Great Repeal Demonstration of the Congregated Trades and Citizens of Dublin’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 July 1843, p. 4. On the possible French derivation, see Bryan P. McGovern, *John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist, Southern Secessionist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), p. 14.

²⁰ Gary Owens, ‘Nationalism without Words: Symbolism and Ritual Behaviour in the Repeal “Monster” Meetings of 1843–45’, in *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850*, ed. by J. S. Donnelly and K. A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), pp. 242–69. See also his ‘Constructing the Repeal Spectacle: Monster Meetings and People Power in Pre-Famine Ireland’, in *People Power: Proceedings of the Third Annual Daniel O’Connell Workshop*, ed. by Maurice R. O’Connell (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1993), pp. 80–93.

²¹ Sir William Howard Russell, writing in the *Anti-Jacobin*, 14 February 1891, cited in John Black Atkins, *The Life of Sir William Howard Russell: The First Special Correspondent* (London: Murray, 1911), p. 30.

appearance among the crowd of ‘several ballad-singers chanting the praises of Dan and Repale [*sic*]’.²²

The performative aspects of the ‘monster’ meeting, the highly visible role of the priesthood, and the repetitive nature of O’Connell’s speeches, was noted by the Resident Magistrate for the County of Meath, Captain George Despard. After witnessing one such rally in August 1843 he informed Dublin Castle that

it did appear very remarkable to me that very shortly after Mr. O’Connell arrived thousands left the ground without even endeavouring to hear him speak, and I was surprised at observing that almost all the country people assembled appeared quite careless as to whether or not they heard any of the speeches.²³

It is perhaps unsurprising, in an age predating means of amplification, that the success of the ‘monster’ meetings was deemed to lie in how they were reported in the press, rather than in the content of the speeches delivered. This was not lost on the authorities. The then Lord Lieutenant Earl de Grey told Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel that the public perception of events was just as important as the actual numbers who turned out:

Their numbers we have reason to know are grossly exaggerated; but they are large enough to paralyze the movements of society — and when O’Connell states in public that he has just been addressing 70,000, 80,000, 120,000 men, the world believes him, & the effect upon the bold or the timid mind is proportionate.²⁴

The campaign of ‘monster’ meetings was brought to an abrupt close by the proclamation of a planned meeting at Clontarf in October, and the arrest and imprisonment of O’Connell and a number of other prominent Repealers. It also enabled the Young Irelanders to exert, under

²² [Ralph Disraeli], *A Visit to the Wild West; or, A Sketch of the Emerald Isle, Picturesque and Political, During the Past Autumn* (London: Nickisson, 1843), p. 17.

²³ George Despard to E. Lucas, 16 August 1843. London, National Archives, CS ORP 22/16/583.

²⁴ De Grey to Peel, 6 May 1843. London, British Library, Peel papers, Add. MSS 40478 ff. 39–44.

the leadership of the Limerick MP William Smith O'Brien, an influence in the Repeal Association which they had hitherto lacked, and in particular to pour their energies into promulgating popular education as a means of attaining a non-sectarian 'nationality' through the pages of their newspaper the *Nation*.²⁵ The manner in which, in pre-Famine Ireland, newspapers were read, shared, and read in public, enabled a small nationalist intelligentsia to exert an influence on nationalist politics to a degree out of all proportion to its numbers. Members of the intelligentsia made 'a disproportionately important contribution to leadership in the Repeal Association' and, after January 1847, the Young Ireland splinter group the Irish Confederation.²⁶ Thus while by the end of 1843, only a year after its foundation, the *Nation* was selling more than 10,000 copies a week, its readership numbered many thousands more.²⁷ Its editor Charles Gavan Duffy would later estimate that at its peak the paper had a readership of more than 250,000, and suggested each copy read aloud at public meetings 'served from fifty to a hundred persons'.²⁸ Both the Repeal Association and Young Ireland relied on the printed word — spread by both oral and written communication — to promote their message, and Repeal Wardens were instructed that following all Repeal meetings, 'the routine business being transacted, the Chairman shall appoint a Reader, who shall read aloud to the meeting from the public journals, books, or tracts, all proceedings connected with the Repeal cause, and other matters of interest.'²⁹ The LNRA transmitted newspapers to its membership, and in so

²⁵ Richard Davis, *Revolutionary Imperialist: William Smith O'Brien, 1803–1864* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), pp. 172–73; on O'Brien's leadership of the Repeal Association during the early months of 1844, see also Robert Sloan, *William Smith O'Brien and the Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 114–15. For an overview of the founding of the *Nation*, see Michael L. Brillman, 'Loyalty and Repeal: The *Nation*, 1842–46', in *Irish Journalism before Independence: More a Disease than a Profession*, ed. by Kevin Rafter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 36–48.

²⁶ Jacqueline Hill, 'The Intelligentsia and Irish Nationalism in the 1840s', *Studia Hibernica*, 20 (1980), 73–109 (p. 85).

²⁷ Mary Casteleyn, *A History of Literacy and Libraries in Ireland: The Long Traced Pedigree* (Aldershot: Gower, 1984), p. 146.

²⁸ Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland: A Fragment of Irish History, 1840–1850* (London: Massell, Petter, Galphin, 1880), p. 387.

²⁹ *Rules for the Establishment of Repeal Reading Rooms, Unanimously Adopted at a Meeting of the Loyal National Repeal Association, Held on Monday, the 13th Jan., 1845*, ed. by Daniel O'Connell (Dublin: Browne, 1845).

doing essentially created its own politicized reading public. The provision of such material enabled the popular imagination of an Irish nation as never before.³⁰

The Repeal movement evolved rather than died after the defeat of Clontarf, its activists' organizational energies diverted to developing a network of Repeal reading rooms. The magnitude of the 'monster' meetings as a spectacle has led commentators to overlook the existence of Repeal reading rooms, which sprang into being from the autumn of 1842, and which have until recently received largely cursory treatment from historians.³¹ The foundation of the first of these rooms in Newcastle, Co. Limerick, in October 1842, was credited to the Repeal Association secretary Thomas Matthew Ray.³² They were designed so that 'the industrious classes might [...] receive the exhortations of the Liberator and the other Repeal leaders conveyed through the public prints, inspiring patriotism, and inculcating peace, order, and perseverance, in working out the regeneration of Ireland'.³³ It should also be noted that the Repeal Association's organization of lay activists as 'Repeal Wardens' was from its inception intended to facilitate the provision of newspapers, for the dual purpose of fundraising and creating a Repeal 'public'. This democratization of communication was evident in the Repeal Wardens' stated duty of ensuring newspapers transmitted from the Dublin headquarters of 'Conciliation Hall' were 'put into the hands of such persons as will give the greatest

³⁰ For the nation as an 'imagined community', see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

³¹ See Roisín Higgins, 'The *Nation* Reading Rooms', in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, IV, pp. 262–73; Casteleyn, pp. 146–50; Margaret Barnes, 'Repeal Reading Rooms', *An Leabharlann: Journal of the Library Association of Ireland*, 23 (1965), 53–57. For an overview, see Paul A. Townend, "'Academies of Nationality": The Reading Room and Irish National Movements, 1838–1905', in *Reading Irish Histories: Texts, Contexts, and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. by Lawrence W. McBride (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), pp. 19–40.

³² See Bridget Hourican, 'Ray, Thomas Matthew (1801–81)', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, online edn <dib.cambridge.org> [accessed 29 August 2013]. See also William J. O'Neill Daunt, *Ireland and Her Agitators* (Dublin: Browne, 1845), p. 283.

³³ T. M. Ray, 'First Quarterly Report upon Repeal Reading Rooms', in *Reports of the Parliamentary Committee of the Loyal National Repeal Association of Ireland*, vol. II (Dublin: Browne, 1845), pp. 329–36 (p. 329).

circulation to their contents; so that each Paper may be read by, and its contents communicated to, as many people as possible'.³⁴

The centrality of newspapers to the Repeal agitation and to fund-raising for the cause is underlined by one of Ray's correspondents, who suggested that there was a direct correlation between the amount of money he was able to raise for the Repeal 'rent' (the centralized fund collected by the Association), and the availability of newspapers with which to evangelize the cause. He told Ray in August 1841 that 'our collection would go on better had we the newspapers to teach the people the political machinery & agitation of the Repeal'.³⁵ Ray himself emphasized the importance of 'reading aloud at stated meetings in these rooms, as an effectual means of conveying instruction to the illiterate'.³⁶

However, the reality of the *limitations* of political mobilization in a society in which newspapers were expensive and the population semi-literate is evident in a request received by Ray from a correspondent in Co. Clare in April 1843. He was asked to send newspapers 'so as to have them read at the different parish chapels on Sunday next'.³⁷ Indeed, the importance of support from the Catholic priesthood as a means of transmitting political intelligence by oral communication, as the 'literate interpreters of O'Connell's mass following', cannot be overstated.³⁸ One member of the Association, based in Dungarvan, recognized as much when he informed the Dublin headquarters that

only the parish priests can be depended on [...]. Let Mr. O'Connell induce the Bishop to give private instructions to the Parish Priests to work the Repeal rent and then it will be done. Without the Priests the cause can never be worked in the country.³⁹

³⁴ *Instructions for the Appointment of Repeal Wardens and Collectors of the Repeal Fund, Their Duties, &c.* (Dublin: Browne, 1843), p. 9.

³⁵ T. C. Ruthven to Ray, 27 August 1841. Dublin, National Library of Ireland (NLI), Repeal Association Papers, MS 13622 (9).

³⁶ 'Conciliation Hall', *Freeman's Journal*, 31 December 1844, p. 3.

³⁷ J. M. Shannon to Ray, 26 April 1843. Repeal Association Papers, NLI MS 13625 (15).

³⁸ Kevin Nowlan, 'The Catholic Clergy and Irish Politics in the Eighteen Thirties and Forties', *Historical Studies*, 9 (1974), 119–35 (p. 124).

³⁹ Letter from R. P. Barron, Dungarvan, to Ray, 25 October 1841. Repeal Association Papers, NLI MS 13623 (44).

After Clontarf, Young Ireland's ill-fated ideologue-in-chief Thomas Davis seized upon the plan of expanding the network of Repeal reading rooms as an opportunity to create a source of moral improvement, envisioning the Repeal Association as 'the Schoolmaster of Ireland':

Were such a Room in every village, you would soon have a knot connected with it of young men who had abjured cards, tobacco, dissipation, and more fatal laziness, and were trying to learn each some science, or art, or accomplishment — anything that best pleased them, from mathematics to music.⁴⁰

In the most recent study of the rooms, Roisín Higgins rightly seeks to place them in the context of the history of the Irish book, depicting this aspect of the repeal movement's organization as being 'situated historically at the juncture between oral and literate societies' (pp. 262, 273). However, by terming the rooms '*Nation* reading rooms', Higgins overstates the role of Young Ireland in the foundation of Ireland's first dedicated network of constitutional nationalist meeting places, which served as loci of politicized cultures of conviviality, orality, and learning.⁴¹ While the *Nation* was certainly read in the rooms, it was also excluded from them by the Association after the schism over questions of education between Young Ireland and the O'Connells in 1846.⁴² During a heated meeting of the Repeal Association in July 1846, at which he denounced the *Nation* as 'dangerous to the cause', O'Connell's son and political heir John made a point of praising Ray for his role in their foundation: 'Mr. Ray first set them on foot; he first put forward the suggestion of supplying them with books; and it was he who lately visited them and enlarged the sphere of their exertions.'⁴³

When discussing Young Ireland's options for founding a new organization in November of that year, three months before they eventually

⁴⁰ Thomas Davis, 'Repeal Reading Rooms', in *Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. by Charles Gavan Duffy (Dublin: Duffy, 1846), pp. 241–46 (first publ. in *Nation*, 17 August 1844).

⁴¹ It is significant that contemporaries, including leading Young Irelanders such as Charles Gavan Duffy, did not refer to the rooms as specifically "*Nation*" reading rooms'.

⁴² Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 51.

⁴³ 'Adjourned Meeting', *Nation*, 1 August 1846, p. 663.

did so with the creation of the Irish Confederation, the *Nation's* co-founder John Blake Dillon told Charles Gavan Duffy that he envisaged

some sort of central committee which may gradually form a connexion with reading societies in the country — which may in time, as it grows in resources, send out lecturers like the anti-corn law league — which in fact may — and will if wisely conducted — become a most powerful association.⁴⁴

Public reading from newspapers was hardly a novel development in Irish culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Fifty years earlier, the United Irishmen ‘both took advantage of, and contributed to, a growing print industry’ in their efforts to achieve independence from Britain.⁴⁵ Jim Smyth has rightly emphasized the importance of literacy in the 1790s to the United Irishmen’s brand of propaganda, while emphasizing that increases in literacy and politicization are processes which are ‘complex, interrelated, subtle, gradual, uneven over time and place, and difficult to trace or demonstrate, let alone verify’.⁴⁶

The organization led by Daniel O’Connell to win Catholic Emancipation in the 1820s, the Catholic Association, while rejecting illegality and conspiracy, mirrored many of the United Irishmen’s propaganda techniques in being ‘acutely media-conscious’.⁴⁷ The first three decades of the nineteenth century saw increasingly effective communications, particularly between the towns, as well as greater access to the written word.⁴⁸ The Association used both literary and oral means of political communication, and O’Connell had originally envisaged the Catholic ‘rent’ as a means of buying favourable coverage for the Catholic cause.⁴⁹ Moreover, it trans-

⁴⁴ Dillon to Duffy, 3 November 1846. Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, Duffy papers, 12/P/19 13.

⁴⁵ Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791–1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Jim Smyth, *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1992), p. 27.

⁴⁷ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 210.

⁴⁸ For an overview of communications in pre-Famine Ireland, see chapter 5 of T. W. Freeman, *Pre-Famine Ireland: A Study in Historical Geography* (Manchester: University Press, 1957).

⁴⁹ Fergus O’Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O’Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1985), p. 77. See also Thomas Bartlett, *The*

mitted reports of its meetings to parishes throughout Ireland: as its historian Sir Thomas Wyse recorded, ‘on Sunday they were read aloud at the chapel door [...]. It is quite incredible the anxiety for political information which this diffusion of the public prints generated.’⁵⁰ This, of course, was part of a wider process by which popular politicization undermined traditional political structures, a process dating from at least the mid-eighteenth century.⁵¹ By the 1840s — fifteen years after the foundation of the National schools system — it seemed to Ireland’s governors that the increasingly high levels of education among O’Connell’s supporters was apparent in their disaffection during the Famine.⁵² At the height of that disaster, the Lord Lieutenant Lord Clarendon told Prime Minister Lord John Russell that Irish discontent could be ascribed to increased levels of literacy:

They are able to read all the furious harangues & pestilent newspapers that pander to their passions. 20 [*sic*] years ago O’Connell could not have organised his Repeal agitation as he did, but it was from among the youths taught at the National Schools that he found all his wardens & most active agents [...]. Education has just taught these people to know their condition, which is a very degraded one & the social system which prevails does nothing to improve it. They are consequently discontented & turbulent.⁵³

Repeal reading rooms had important precedents, and not solely that they coincided with the maturation of the first generation to have

Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question, 1690–1830 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1992), p. 330.

⁵⁰ Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland*, 2 vols (London: Colburn, 1829), I, 339.

⁵¹ S. J. Connolly, ‘Mass Politics and Sectarian Conflict, 1823–30’, in *A New History of Ireland*, ed. by Francis X. Martin and others, 9 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982–2008), v: *Ireland Under the Union, 1801–1870*, ed. by W. E. Vaughan (1989), pp. 79–107 (p. 88).

⁵² On the role of the National Schools system in increasing popular literacy in English, see Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 378–81.

⁵³ Clarendon to Russell, 3 December 1847. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Clarendon MSS dep. Irish, Letter-book 2.

attended the National schools. Increased literacy facilitated increased political participation, as in Cork in 1835, when O'Connellite retailers, master craftsmen, and tradesmen had sought to found a 'People's Hall' as a place where members of different classes could meet, to which would be appended 'a cheap Reading Room, where Newspapers and Books might be had at so very moderate a charge as would be an almost irresistible temptation to the Public to become subscribers'. In so doing, they sought to create 'a brood of local Reading Rooms [...] [which] next to places of Religious worship [...] [would be] the most powerful adversaries' of 'vice'.⁵⁴ Moreover, the 1820s and 1830s had witnessed the spread of Mechanics' Institutes in Britain, sponsored by middle-class rational recreationists for the purpose of spreading education among the working classes. By 1849, these numbered 203 in England and Wales, and although they were widely perceived as a failure by their founders, remain an important marker in the history of adult education.⁵⁵ It has been suggested that in Ireland, the Mechanics' Institutes 'never really got off the ground [...] since they never affected more than a tiny proportion of the working classes'.⁵⁶ Recent local studies have shown that they did exist in Belfast, Dublin, and Cork, and in at least eleven other provincial towns. As such, they provided a model of instituting educational environments at a provincial level mirrored in the proliferation of libraries over the course of the century.⁵⁷ However, their programme was avowedly apolitical, based on scientific and technical education, and newspapers were often excluded from them for fear of inflaming sectarian passions.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Circular from the Cork Trades' Association to Richard Dowden, 6 June 1835. Day Papers Scrapbook, vol. 1, U140/2128, Cork County Council Archives. See also Maura Cronin, 'Young Ireland in Cork, 1840–49', in *History and the Public Sphere: Essays in Honour of John A. Murphy*, ed. by Tom Dunne and Laurence M. Geary (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), pp. 114–26 (pp. 118–19).

⁵⁵ Edward Royle, 'Mechanics Institutes and the Working Classes', *Historical Journal*, 14 (1971), 305–21.

⁵⁶ J. R. R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster, 1700–1900* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University Belfast, 1987), p. 127.

⁵⁷ Marie-Louise Legg, 'Libraries', in *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, IV, 243–61 (p. 258).

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Neswald, 'Science, Sociability and the Improvement of Ireland: The Galway Mechanics' Institute, 1826–51', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 39 (2006), 503–34; Jim Cooke, 'The Dublin Mechanics' Institute, 1824–1919', in *Prometheus's Fire: A History of Scientific and Technological Education in Ireland*, ed. by

Key to the purpose of Repeal reading rooms was to bridge the gap between the literate and illiterate by providing reading materials, and by reading aloud:

The artisan can resort to them as a delightful recreation in his leisure hours, while the illiterate can become acquainted with the passing events of the day by hearing the public journals read aloud, and with the history, wrongs, and hopes of Ireland, through the same medium, from the books and tracts. (Ray, 'First Quarterly Report', p. 335)

Furthermore, although there is no direct evidence that women used the reading rooms, a report received by the LNRA from Shannon harbour stressed that 'the influence of the room on the collection of the Repeal Rent had been such that there is not a man, woman, or youth in the neighbourhood, who does not contribute'.⁵⁹ The Repeal reading rooms that began appearing in Irish towns and cities in late 1842 most closely resembled the reading rooms sponsored by Father Mathew's Cork Total Abstinence Society since 1838, which had been set up to provide the same social function as taverns in a drink-free environment.⁶⁰ Mathew's repeated attempts to maintain the temperance reading rooms as apolitical spaces led him to believe that the Repeal rooms were established 'in a spirit of opposition', despite the promotion of abstinence among their members.⁶¹ Certainly, a number of temperance rooms effectively began to function as Repeal reading rooms in 1843, and as William Smith O'Brien told O'Connell, in effect 'the subscribers to the temperance societies, being all Repealers' meant that they functioned as such even when not

Norman McMillan (Carlow: Tyndale, 2000), pp. 337–49; Marie-Louise Legg, 'The Kilkenny Circulating-Library Society and the Growth of Reading Rooms in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', in *The Experience of Reading: Irish Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy (Dublin: Rare Books Group of the Library Association of Ireland, 1999), pp. 109–23.

⁵⁹ T. M. Ray, 'Second Supplemental Report on Repeal Reading Rooms', in *Reports of the Parliamentary Committee of the Loyal National Repeal Association of Ireland*, vol. II, pp. 343–47 (p. 345).

⁶⁰ John F. Quinn, *Father Mathew's Crusade: Temperance in Nineteenth-Century Ireland and Irish America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p. 61.

⁶¹ Colm Kerrigan, *Father Mathew and the Irish Temperance Movement, 1838–1849* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992), p. 117.

officially connected to the LNRA.⁶² When Charles Gavan Duffy offered to donate copies of the *Nation* to reading rooms throughout the country in March 1843 (an offer hastily withdrawn due to over-demand) only four of the recipients were specifically ‘Repeal’ reading rooms, while of the other thirty-four establishments, twenty-four entitled themselves ‘temperance’ or ‘abstinence’ reading rooms.⁶³ Ray privately believed that the two organizations should be kept distinct, writing of the ‘propriety of keeping the Temperance movement clear on its own basis’, and stating his belief that Repeal ‘should have its exclusive sphere [...]. Let them cherish teetotalism in their Temperance Rooms, and Repeal in the Reading Rooms.’⁶⁴

After their 1844 trial, O’Connell and his fellow Repeal ‘Traversers’ were imprisoned in comfortable conditions in Richmond Brideswell from 30 May until 6 September 1844.⁶⁵ A clear indication of Young Ireland’s increased influence in the Association in their absence is demonstrated by the fact that by early 1845 almost one quarter of the entire Repeal fund was given over to the provision of newspapers and the maintenance of Repeal reading rooms.⁶⁶ In January 1845, it was announced in the Association that a reading room should be founded for every two thousand enrolled Repealers in the towns and eight hundred in the rural parishes.⁶⁷ The decision of the Association to issue regulations for their foundation and provide a degree of funding to reading rooms must be seen as an attempt to provide spaces by which the Repeal public, ‘by reading, or having read for them, good books, by communing with their more intelligent brother Repealers [...] will be thoroughly awakened to their wants and their rights [...] [and] will learn and properly understand that “Knowledge is Power”’ (Ray, ‘Second Supplemental Report’, p. 347). Certainly, Thomas Davis believed they were ‘unquestionably destined to effect a gigantic moral revolution’ in the near future.⁶⁸

⁶² O’Brien to O’Connell, 5 September 1845. Dublin, University College Dublin Archives, O’Connell papers, P12/4/A/85.

⁶³ ‘Popular Reading Societies’, *Nation*, 18 March 1843, p. 360.

⁶⁴ Ray to O’Brien, 4 September 1845. O’Brien papers, NLI MS 435 f. 1387.

⁶⁵ Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848–1922: Theatres of War* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 45.

⁶⁶ *Rules for the Establishment of Repeal Reading Rooms, Unanimously Adopted at a Meeting of the Loyal National Repeal Association, Held on Monday, the 13th Jan., 1845* (Dublin: Browne, 1845), p. 2.

⁶⁷ ‘Loyal National Repeal Association’, *Nation*, 18 January 1845, p. 226.

⁶⁸ ‘Popular Reading Societies’, *Nation*, 4 March 1843, p. 329.

The *Nation* envisaged the Repeal reading rooms as places for collective and self-improvement through both oral communication (by reading out loud) and by personal study, counselling that

every institution of the kind should either have two rooms, one for books and study, the other for newspapers and political business; or, if there be only one room, reading aloud and all political business should be limited to few and fixed hours, and the rest of the time left for study.⁶⁹

The rooms provided Young Ireland with a stage on which to promote their agenda, in person as well as in print. In one such instance, Thomas MacNevin lectured in the Custom House Ward reading room in Dublin, on the thought of Thomas Carlyle: ‘Universal History,’ he announced, ‘the history of what man has accomplished in the world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.’ He went on to outline Carlyle’s taxonomy of the heroic, before admitting ‘the writer whom I have tonight chosen to introduce to your admiration, Thomas Carlyle, has in his classification omitted the heroism of the Patriot’.⁷⁰ Charles Gavan Duffy would later claim that O’Connell viewed the rooms as simply an extension of the Association’s fundraising through the repeal ‘rent’, but at the time the Irish leader thought them ‘a rational mode of spending the evening’ which would take young men ‘away from the public house’ for ‘rational and instructive amusement’, baulking only at providing the rooms with centralized funding: ‘we cannot undertake to give money — the cases are too numerous; but in all cases we will be able to give newspapers.’⁷¹ O’Connell’s use of ‘rationality’, as opposed to Young Ireland’s ‘nationality’, is telling: although he endorsed the rooms, he did so without Davis’s educational zeal, and it is clear that he opposed Young Ireland’s desire to create a separate fund for the maintenance of the reading rooms.⁷²

⁶⁹ ‘Repeal Education’, *Nation*, 10 May 1845, p. 505.

⁷⁰ Thomas MacNevin, *Characters of Great Men, and the Duties of Patriotism: A Lecture* (Dublin: McGlashar, 1846), pp. 11, 16.

⁷¹ C. G. Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres*, 2 vols (London: Fisher Unwin, 1898), II, 68; ‘Conciliation Hall’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 22 September 1844, p. 3.

⁷² See Martin Crean to O’Brien, 28 August 1844, protesting against a proposal for Duffy for a separate collection for the reading rooms which he warned would ‘distract the people from the efficient collection of the Repeal Rent’ and which he believed would ‘lead to disputes’ (O’Brien papers, NLI MS 434 f. 1232).

These establishments, perhaps unsurprisingly, were an urban rather than a rural phenomenon, reflecting the higher levels of literacy in Ireland's towns and cities.⁷³ They were situated largely in locations that were accessible from Dublin by the horse-drawn car service instituted by Charles Bianconi (himself a prominent O'Connellite), which was then reaching its peak.⁷⁴ Indeed, the correlation between the location of the reading rooms and the routes of the then-famous 'Bians', which were a staple of Irish travel literature at the time, is striking. While the railway in Ireland was still in its infancy, Bianconi's network had already begun a transport revolution that saw journey times dramatically reduced, thereby enabling the distribution of printed material from the metropole to reach market towns throughout Leinster and Munster when still current to events in Dublin.⁷⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, even the remotest rural communities were theoretically in reach of administrative, commercial, and ecclesiastical social services.⁷⁶ As early as 1828, the *Catholic Miscellany* had opined on the effect this had had on Irish-speaking society: 'In a few years Irish will cease to be spoken; it has ceased to be fashionable — new roads and newspapers have rendered a knowledge of English absolutely necessary.'⁷⁷ Following the 1831 foundation of the Irish Board of Public Works, improved transport infrastructure facilitated a dramatically im-

⁷³ Naoki Sakiyama, 'Dublin Merchants and the Irish Repeal Movement of the 1840s', *Journal of International Economic Studies*, 24 (2010), 31–48 (p. 41).

⁷⁴ M. O'Connell Bianconi and S. J. Watson, *Bianconi: King of the Irish Roads* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1962), p. 186. For a contemporary biography of Bianconi by his daughter, see Mary John O'Connell, *Charles Bianconi: A Biography, 1786–1875* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1878). For background on Bianconi's transport network, see Timothy P. O'Neill, 'Bianconi and his Cars', in *Travel and Transport in Ireland*, ed. by Kevin B. Nowlan (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), pp. 83–95.

⁷⁵ On the transport revolution in pre-Famine Ireland, see Arnold Horner, 'Ireland's Time-Space Revolution: Improvements to Pre-Famine Travel', *History Ireland*, 15.5 (2007), 22–27. For the routes of the 'Bians', see Ivor Herring, 'The "Bians" (1)', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3rd ser., 2 (1939), 130–37 (p. 134). For an example of a description of a journey in a 'Bian', see W. M. Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch-Book*, by M. A. Titmarsh, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 1, 239–41.

⁷⁶ T. Jones Hughes, 'Village and Town in Mid Nineteenth Century Ireland', *Irish Geography*, 14 (1981), 99–107 (p. 106).

⁷⁷ 'The Ancient Irish', *Catholic Miscellany*, July–December 1828, pp. 203–12 (p. 212). On road building in the pre-Famine period, see John H. Andrews, 'Road Planning in Ireland Before the Railway Age', *Irish Geography*, 5 (1964), 1–17.

proved and cheaper postal service, which was vital to the print culture of Repeal, if largely irrelevant to the majority of the rural poor.⁷⁸ The ramifications of this ‘time–space’ revolution for the popular imagining of an Irish nation are hard to overstate, but it should be noted that this did not extend to many rural areas — a fact noted by contemporaries.⁷⁹ Ray told Smith O’Brien in December 1844 that the reading rooms were intended to promulgate Repeal doctrine by fostering an organizational infrastructure linked by the printed page to Dublin, but that the Repeal Association was necessarily limited in its ability to proselytize to the peasantry:

As to the rural districts I believe you will find we have undertaken as much as we can do — on an average the Post Towns are within from 10 to 15 miles of each other — I think our system will be effective immediately in most of these, and successively extend by the example & utility, while you will perceive the plan is designed to make these institutions & the extension of the repeal organisation auxiliary to each other.⁸⁰

Although this network of nearly one hundred dedicated organizational centres across all four provinces of Ireland must be seen as a significant development in the history of constitutional nationalist organization, their numbers have been subject to debate, not least due to Duffy’s disingenuous claim in his 1898 autobiography that they numbered ‘nearly 1,200’ (*My Life in Two Hemispheres*, II, 146). In 1844, Davis had despaired that

of the three hundred Repeal Reading Rooms we know that some, and fear that many are ill-managed, have few or no books, and are mere gossiping-rooms. Such a room is useless; such a room is a disgrace to its members and their educated neighbours.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Mairead Reynolds, *A History of the Irish Post Office* (Dublin: MacDonnell Whyte, 1984), p. 61. On the Irish Board of Public Works in the pre-Famine period, see A. R. G. Griffiths, *The Irish Board of Works, 1831–1878* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp. 32–69.

⁷⁹ T. W. Freeman, ‘Irish Towns in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, in *The Development of the Irish Town*, ed. by R. A. Butin (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 101–38 (pp. 108–09).

⁸⁰ Ray to O’Brien, 2 December 1844. O’Brien papers, NLI MS 434 f. 1283.

⁸¹ ‘Educate, that you may be free’, *Nation*, 5 October 1844, p. 828.



Fig. 1: Location of Repeal Reading Rooms, January 1846–December 1848. Data collated from LNRA Account Book, NLI MS 25637.

Davis's total of three hundred reading rooms has been accepted without question by a number of historians.⁸² However, an examination of the sole extant LNRA accounts book reveals that there were in fact less than a third of this number. Drawing on this hitherto unused source, it is now

⁸² Casteleyn, p. 145; Townend, p. 27; Higgins, p. 264.

possible to map the geographical location of the Repeal reading rooms for the first time (*Fig. 1*).

Between 1846 and 1848 a total of ninety-three Repeal reading rooms were sent newspapers on a weekly basis by the Association in Dublin. Of these, seventy-nine were in Ireland: thirty-nine in Leinster, twenty-five in Munster, and seven in both Connaught and Ulster (previous analyses have omitted the existence of repeal reading rooms in Ulster at all) (Barnes, pp. 53–55). The largest concentrations of the rooms were in Dublin, where there were fourteen such establishments, and Cork, which boasted six. In Scotland, there were Repeal reading rooms at Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Airdrie; while in England, there were six Repeal reading rooms in London, and one each in Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham: in Liverpool a centralized ‘Repeal Hall’ received newspapers from Dublin.⁸³ While Davis’s figure of three hundred rooms is fanciful, and his desire to extend them to each of the three thousand parishes in Ireland more so, nonetheless the reading rooms constitute an impressive feat of organization, and were as close to a nationwide network of constitutional nationalist organizational infrastructure as had yet existed in Ireland.⁸⁴

Despite the undoubted importance of the priesthood for the mobilization of Repeal, of the ninety-three men the Association transmitted newspapers to for use in Repeal reading rooms, only twelve were members of the clergy.⁸⁵ In Dublin, the Repeal Wardens who oversaw the reading rooms appear to have been middle-class O’Connellites. John Fox, in charge of the Audeon’s Ward room, was a vintner.⁸⁶ In Monkstown, Thomas Magee, who rented a property at £22 10s. annually, was a ‘provisions dealer’, as was Peter Byrne of the Four Courts Ward (*Thom’s Irish Almanac*, p. 809). Some of these activists, such as John Kelch, a chandler, had been involved in O’Connellite politics for years. Kelch had been listed in the press selling tickets to a charitable dinner attended by O’Connell as early as January 1833.⁸⁷ Nearly thirty years later, and now a

⁸³ LNRA Accounts book, January 1846–December 1848, NLI MS 25637.

⁸⁴ Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, *Thomas Davis: Memoirs of an Irish Patriot, 1840–1846* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1890), p. 216.

⁸⁵ On the role of the clergy in O’Connellite politics, see Nowlan, ‘The Catholic Clergy and Irish Politics in the Eighteen Thirties and Forties’.

⁸⁶ *Thom’s Irish Almanac and Official Directory* (Dublin: the author, 1847), p. 839.

⁸⁷ ‘Advertisements & Notices’, *Freeman’s Journal*, 3 January 1833, p. 1.

Town Commissioner, Kelch was present when plans were first developed to build the Dublin O'Connell monument in 1862.⁸⁸

When the Committee was appointed by the Repeal Association to prepare a report on the reading rooms in April 1845, it emphasized the moral benefits resulting from their foundation, especially to young men. It was announced that the reading room in Athlone had been

the means of giving to the poor mechanic an opportunity of improving his knowledge of men and things, and no doubt will have a very moral tendency. We perceive men who hitherto loitered their time strolling round the streets or carousing in the whiskey shops, now frequent the reading room with every measure of enjoyment. (Ray, 'First Quarterly Report', p. 334)

The idea of a 'union of classes' was fundamental to the Young Ireland conception of nationalism and, hence, the purpose of the reading room. As both organizational bases and politicized spaces, the Repeal reading rooms must be seen as unique, in that they were educational establishments founded with the dual intention of achieving a political goal, Repeal, and from Young Ireland's perspective, a non-sectarian cultural identity, Davisite 'nationality'. In January 1845, the Young Irelander Thomas MacNevin explained to a Dublin reading room that it should be

a place for training the mind, of culture for social feelings [...] to bring men of the different classes of the national party together. There are, and ever will be, differences in ranks — men are unequal — inequality begins in the cradle, and follows them to the grave [...]. We wish to get the men of the professions to mingle with the men of trade, and the richer shopkeeper with the poorer artisan.⁸⁹

Writing in 1851, the educationalist J. W. Hudson lamented of the 'the Literary and Philosophical Societies of Ireland' that 'the same state of inactivity and uselessness that characterize similar institutions in Great

⁸⁸ *Report of the O'Connell Monument Committee*, ed. by John Canon O'Hanlon (Dublin: Duffy, 1888), p. xx. See also Peter Alter, 'Symbols of Irish Nationalism', in *Reactions to Irish Nationalism, 1865–1914*, ed. by Alan O'Day (London: Hambleton Press, 1987), pp. 1–20.

⁸⁹ 'Custom House Ward – Repeal Reading Rooms', *Nation*, 8 February 1845, p. 295.

Britain', while conceding that in 1844, 'an attempt was made to establish reading-rooms in every populous parish in the country [...] but *from the want of books and magazines* they soon became mere gossiping rooms and were given up'.⁹⁰ If the Repeal reading rooms were the first of their kind in constitutional nationalist organization in Ireland, it is apposite to ask why they were such a short-lived phenomenon: the few that had not lapsed into desuetude were suppressed after 1848, and a similar network did not appear in Ireland for a generation (Legg, 'Libraries', p. 254).

The answer lies in a combination of factors: the dissolution of the Repeal movement itself into internecine rivalries after 1846, the suppression of nationalist press by the authorities in consequence of Young Ireland's abortive putsch in 1848, and, above all, the devastation of the country by the Famine, and consequent dramatic depopulation of the rural countryside.⁹¹ However, even before Smith O'Brien's ill-fated Ballingarry adventure, Young Ireland's Irish Confederation had taken a distinct turn away from Davisite educationalism towards advocating physical force.⁹² It is notable that John Mitchel emphasized that the 'confederate clubs' should serve a separatist, rather than an educationalist, purpose: he 'did not approve of making these clubs mere reading rooms or mechanics' institutes. He thought their great object and study, in lectures and reading, should be to rid the island of English rule.⁹³ From contemporary police reports, it is clear that the clubs of the Irish Confederation served a similar purpose to the Repeal reading rooms — one unnamed policeman in Dublin recorded that he had attended a Dublin club for much of the day on 22 April 1848, when 'there was not 20 [*sic*] members present, at any one time during the day; and those present occupied themselves reading'. Nonetheless, other currents were at work:

⁹⁰ J. W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1851), pp. 213–14, emphasis in original.

⁹¹ On the Young Ireland response to the Famine, see Sean Ryder, 'Reading Lessons: Famine and the *Nation*, 1845–1849', in *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine*, ed. by Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), pp. 151–163. On rural depopulation in the post-Famine period, see Kevin O'Rourke, 'Emigration and Living Standards in Ireland since the Famine', *Journal of Population Economics*, 8 (1995), 407–21 (p. 410).

⁹² Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity, 1789–2006* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 221.

⁹³ 'The Swift Club', *Nation*, 27 October 1847, p. 829.

he also reported that ‘there were two or three pike heads brought into the room’.⁹⁴

After the death of O’Connell in May 1847, the Repeal Association’s popularity nosedived, and with it that organization’s ability to provide its members with newspapers.⁹⁵ O’Connell’s son John suspended the Association’s meetings altogether in the wake of the 1848 rebellion in the belief that ‘pending the excitement occasioned by the mad attempt at Insurrection made by Smith O’Brien and others and the hostile temper of the British Parliament, it would be unsafe to the cause to hold any public meeting of the Repeal Association’.⁹⁶ The government spy John Donnellan Balfe, who informed on members of the Irish Confederation for the better part of a year, believed the Ballingarry farrago had caused a widespread disaffection with politics, telling his handler in September 1848 that ‘the persons who were in the habit of reading newspapers have left the country by thousands, and thousands of others have become so disgusted with politics that they cannot endure the sight of a newspaper’.⁹⁷ By the time John O’Connell sought a short-lived revival of the Repeal Association in 1851, its Committee was forced to admit that it had ‘no funds to subscribe for newspapers — nor have we any parties here now to use them’.⁹⁸

Twenty years later, when W. J. O’Neill Daunt was researching a work that would eventually appear after a long gestation as *Eighty-Five Years of Irish History*, he wrote to Ray for information about the relationship between the Repeal Association and its supporters.⁹⁹ Ray replied by stressing the centralizing function of the Association, in exercising control over its supporters and in providing them with O’Connellite propaganda in the form of newspapers. He emphasized that ‘I don’t recollect

⁹⁴ Police Reports, ‘C.G.’, 23 April 1848. Dublin, Trinity College Archives, MSS 2037 Vol. 1 S.3.5. (2037).

⁹⁵ Angus Macintyre, *The Liberator: Daniel O’Connell and the Irish Party, 1830–1847* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), pp. 295–96.

⁹⁶ LNRA Minute Book, 18 August 1848. Dublin Diocesan Archives (DDA). The extant LNRA Minute Book held by the Dublin Diocesan Archives covers the sporadic meetings of the Association between July 1848 and March 1851. It is a separate document to the LNRA Accounts Book held by the National Library of Ireland (see note 83).

⁹⁷ Balfe to Major E. Turner, 5 September 1848. Bodley Clarendon MSS Box 53.

⁹⁸ LNRA Minute Book, 21 May 1851, DDA.

⁹⁹ William Joseph O’Neill Daunt, *Eighty-Five Years of Irish History*, 2 vols (London: Ward and Downey, 1886).

any local clubs so called — there were Repeal Wardens in each district and these generally had a reading room for the members &c. but none could do any act by which the Association could be compromised'. Ray noted a qualitative change in the circumstances facing Irish nationalist activists of the Home Rule generation when compared to their O'Connellite predecessors, by adding that 'I suppose there is less need now of newspapers in the way we used to send them, papers now being so cheap'.¹⁰⁰ The Repeal movement antedated the repeal of taxes on newspapers in the 1850s and the expansion of Ireland's railways, both of which fostered a cheap press and a democratization of communication.¹⁰¹ The significance of the Association's function as a centralized body providing nationalist newspapers, and hence as part of this process of democratization, cannot be overstressed. That 'Repeal' thrived in a culture that was both literate *and* oral, evidenced by the mark it made on Irish folk culture, is clear.¹⁰² However, as Ireland seemingly lurched towards a separatist outbreak in the summer of 1848, the authorities were convinced of the importance of newspapers to popular politicization: the Lord Lieutenant thought that

newspapers circulating by thousands and read by hundreds of thousands people [*sic*] while clubs are organising & arming the masses would be sufficient to drive the most peaceable rural population of England to rebellion, and could not fail to do so with the Irish who are excitable, disaffected, and thoroughly demoralized by 25 years of agitation and goading against British rule.¹⁰³

Certainly, the authorities believed that the suppression of radical newspapers after the Ballingarry 'rising' had had a beneficial effect: one Resident Magistrate told Dublin Castle that the suspension of Habeus Corpus, and the tactical suppression of a number of titles including the *Nation* and John Mitchel's *United Irishman*, had been 'most beneficial [...]'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ray to Daunt, 30 September 1871. Daunt papers, NLI MS 10507. In 1853, the advertisement tax was repealed, followed by the abolition of the newspaper stamp tax in 1855, which dramatically reduced the cost of newspapers.

¹⁰¹ David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), p. 151.

¹⁰² Ríonach úí Ógáin, *Immortal Dan: Daniel O'Connell in Irish Folk Tradition* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1995), pp. 81–83.

¹⁰³ Clarendon to Russell, 9 July 1848. Bodley Clarendon MSS, Letter Book 3.

Those poisonous publications were read at all the local Public Houses and cheap reading rooms on Sunday. This has ceased.¹⁰⁴ Another reported that he had been applied to by a parish priest ‘as to whether I approved to him getting up a news room to be open to the police & the authorities’, but had told him he was opposed to any further reading rooms ‘amongst the lower orders’, and reported that ‘habits of drunkenness having [*sic*] set in amongst some of the artisans, who hereforeto [*sic*] spent their time in the news rooms instead of the public house’.¹⁰⁵

Radvan Markus has suggested that, in the 1790s, ‘significant sections of the Gaelic-speaking population lived untouched by writing or print’, and ascribes this condition as analogous to what Walter Ong has termed ‘primary orality’.¹⁰⁶ Yet the archival records that survive from the period show the United Irishmen to have engaged in a vigorous print-based propaganda campaign; it is important not to equate the lives of the rural poor with a prelapsarian pre-political world view without evidence, and to note that during the eighteenth century printed books had become accessible to an increasing number of people.¹⁰⁷ If a majority of Ireland’s pre-Famine population were unable to read or write and hence lived in a state of ‘orality’, theirs are voices that are silent to the historian, or at best, they have come down to us as the ‘shouts of vanished crowds’.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the equation of peasant life with a ‘pure state of the national culture’, promulgated by Young Ireland like the Fenians after them, was undertaken in a culture of print, which was either read, or read aloud in public; it is from the remnants of that culture that the historian can draw.¹⁰⁹ While a great many people in pre-Famine Ireland were illiterate and therefore

¹⁰⁴ C. Hunt, R. M. Co. Tipperary, to Dublin Castle, January 1849. London, National Archives Office (NAO) CO 904/9 ff.347–49.

¹⁰⁵ W. S. Tracy, Co. Limerick, to Dublin Castle. NAO CO 904/9 ff.347–49.

¹⁰⁶ Radvan Markus, “‘Níl an Focal Sin Againn’: Orality, Literacy, and Accounts of the 1798 Rebellion’, *New Hibernia Review*, 14.1 (2010), 112–26 (p. 115). For the concept of ‘primary orality’, see Ong, pp. 31–75.

¹⁰⁷ Iain McBride, *Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2009), p. 56.

¹⁰⁸ The thought occurs to Stephen Daedalus while absent-mindedly staring at prints of racehorses, but also shortly after talking about O’Connell and Irish history to Mr. Deasy, who claims to ‘remember the famine in ‘46’ (James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 38).

¹⁰⁹ For the manner in which successive generations of Irish writers have sought to (re)mythologize the Irish peasant, see Edward Hirsch, ‘The Imaginary Irish Peasant’, *PMLA*, 106 (1991), 1116–33 (p. 1121).

living in a state of orality ('primary' or otherwise), it behoves the historian to use the archival record as extant, mindful of its silence as to the voices of the rural poor, and in full knowledge of the fact that it is 'impossible for archives to reflect all aspects and elements of society'.¹¹⁰

After the false dawn of the news of revolution in Paris, the summer of 1848 saw an explosion of nationalist mobilization unseen since the 1790s.¹¹¹ It is striking that those areas of Ireland with the highest concentration of Repeal reading rooms — Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny, and parts of South Tipperary — were also the areas with the highest levels of support for the Irish Confederation, but it should also be borne in mind that these areas were predominantly urban centres in an overwhelmingly rural society. Duffy himself admitted as late as June 1848 that the Irish Confederation had made few inroads in the countryside.¹¹² During the Famine, a majority of the rural poor in Ireland were more concerned with sustenance than the constitutional niceties of where their parliament should be. Here, the Young Irelander Richard O'Gorman's account of his attempts to raise the peasantry in rural Tipperary in 1848 provides a striking indication of the gulf between the nationalism brokered by urban elites and the concerns of those living in a rural economy in crisis. Written in 1881, it is worth reading for any student of nationalism in the nineteenth century:

We had all been woefully deceived — wholly misinformed as to the condition of the people in the remote counties [...]. Their political education had taught them only the virtue of meetings and processions and eloquent harangues [...]. [They] were very ignorant on the subject of politics — the

¹¹⁰ Rodney G. S. Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria*, 61 (2006), 215–33 (p. 216) <<http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12541/13687>> [accessed 14 May 2014].

¹¹¹ Gary Owens, 'Popular Mobilisation and the Rising of 1848: The Clubs of the Irish Confederation', in *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland*, ed. by Laurence M. Geary (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 51–63. Owens estimates the total membership of the confederate clubs to have been around forty-five thousand; against this should be set the total population of Ireland at the time, of approximately eight million. See D. B. Grigg, *Population Growth and Agrarian Change: An Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 115.

¹¹² 'Meeting of the Irish Confederation', *Nation*, 10 June 1848, p. 370.

diffusion of knowledge among them, now so widespread, did not then exist — The horizon of their thoughts was bounded by the parish in which they lived, and to tell them of an ‘Irish nation,’ was to fill their ears with a sound to which no real meaning was attached.¹¹³

While the printed word was an important medium of Irish nationalism(s) in the pre-Famine period, particularly in urban areas, its impact on political understanding among Ireland’s rural poor — a silent majority in the archival record — must not be overstated.

¹¹³ O’Gorman to Duffy, 23 May 1881. Narratives of the Ballingarry Rising, NLI MS 5886.