A Brief History of the Munster News 1851-1935

Birth of the Munster News

The first issue of the Munster News was published in Limerick on the morning of Saturday 7 June 1851. As was the custom of the time the front page was nearly filled with advertisements. Hidden among them, half way down the page, was...

NEW LIMERICK MORNING PAPER
THE MUNSTER NEWS
AND
PROVINCIAL ADVERTISER
FRANCIS COUNIHAN
PROPRIETOR AND EDITOR

Underneath was the prospectus of the new paper. In florid prose Francis Counihan set forth his personal suitability to be the proprietor and editor of a newspaper and the policies he would pursue. He claimed the "approval of men of worth", "the patronage of Persons of Good Capacity and Influence", and "lengthened experience as an Editor." A Catholic and proud of his religion, he would defend the faith and its free exercise and advocate with equal zeal liberty of conscience for all creeds and sects. He would strive for national accord; co-operation in politics, between landlord and tenant and in society at large. He advocated building up Irish industry, trade and agriculture and looked forward to the re-establishment of the Irish Parliament. The Munster News would have twenty eight columns with larger pages than the other Limerick papers. Nor alone would it provide the news from Munster but also from the chief cities of these realms drawn from original sources or contemporary publications. It would be published twice a week on the mornings of Wednesday and Saturday. The subscription of £2 per annum was payable in advance. The extensive circulation would benefit advertisers.

The Provincial Newspaper Business

The business case for a new paper was weak. Limerick, with a population of about 45,000, was already well served by 3 newspapers, the Limerick Chronicle, the Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator (hereinafter referred to as the Limerick Reporter) and the Limerick & Clare Examiner. It was far from clear that there was room for another, six Limerick newspapers had been launched and died over the previous 20 years, the average lifespan being 22 months. The Limerick Reporter had almost gone under the previous year.

by Brendan Burke

In 1830 the average circulation of Irish newspapers was only 547 and the number of advertisements per issue a paltry 16. The corresponding figures in England were 3,240 and 80. The market had improved only marginally since then. Morning papers such as the Munster News were at a particular disadvantage because news-vendors in cities hired out these papers several times in the day before selling them at half price, severely reducing the circulation figures. Hence the Munster News soon became an evening paper.

Newspapers required considerable capital for investment and start-up costs. A new French printing machine then cost £750-£800, a second hand machine £50. Publishers had to deposit a bond in the sum of £200 as a surety against conviction for seditions or blasphemous libel. Advertisements and newsprint were taxed.

Small provincial newspapers were not profitable and had to be heavily subsidised by job printing. In 1860 job printing contributed 50% of the income of the Belfast Mercury. The weekly cost of publishing the Mercury was around £150 while income was £75. Throughout its life the Munster News regularly ran advertisements promoting its general printing capabilities. Papers lived from election to election for it was only then that they made money. During elections the candidate's addresses or manifestos were published as advertisements at a shilling per line. This was also applied to anything published in favour of a candidate, including leading articles and even letters.

Francis Counihan

The man who took the gamble of launching the Munster News was Francis Counihan. Born in 1807, near Killarney, into a family with some money, Francis received a very good classical education. Little is known of his early life but his obituary states "he became editor of the Cork Southern Reporter and subsequently of the Limerick Examiner. After this he started his own paper."
Maurice Lenihan, proprietor and editor of the Limerick Reporter confirms that Francis Counihan was the editor of the Limerick Examiner. It has not been possible to confirm that he had also edited the Southern Reporter.

Early Days

The Munster News started in offices and printing house at 29 Patrick Street, but moved to 5 Rutland Street 17 months later. Within the first month there was a wildcat strike by the printers caused, Counihan alleged, “by a plot by skulking parties to overthrow this Journal.” In the light of later events, he may have had Maurice Lenihan, proprietor and editor of the Limerick Reporter, in mind.

Maurice Lenihan provides a vivid account of the start-up. The early days of the Munster News were a struggle for existence. The type was old and worn. Although the paper received a weekly fixed sum subscription from Denis O’Connor, a retired Clerk of the Sessions, Counihan experienced great difficulty in paying his employees and suppliers. Scarcely a week went by without a summons for payment being served on him. The circulation in 1854 was only 430 and while this represented 14% of the market, it produced a gross income of only £3 per week.

The fortunes of the paper improved in the mid-1850s with elections, the abolition of some taxes and the demise of two rival papers. By 1859 an office had been opened in Ennis. The cover price dropped from 5 pence to 4 pence in 1857 but this was partially offset by the removal of newspaper tax in 1861. The improved fortunes of the paper were reflected in the lifestyle of its proprietor – “a horse was followed by a car and the horse and car were followed by a pair of horses and a second hand brougham or phaeton.”

The Feud

The early 1860s were dominated by a furious feud between Francis Counihan and Maurice Lenihan. The relationship between the two men had been acrimonious for some years. I believe that Counihan had prepared to set up the Munster News in the expectation that the Limerick Reporter was about to go out of business, and would be followed shortly thereafter by the Examiner, leaving a gap in the market for his new paper. However in 1850, before Counihan had had time to launch the Munster News, Lenihan moved his Tipperary Vindicator from Nenagh to Limerick and merged it with the Limerick Reporter. So now instead of a gap in the market, Counihan faced an invigorated Reporter. The following year Lenihan, instead of having a clear run in Limerick, faced the upstart Munster News. Worse still, the Munster News sought precisely the same Catholic, liberal and national segment of the market occupied by the Reporter. Lenihan’s description of his paper on its 21st anniversary in 1880 is strikingly similar to Counihan’s 1851 prospectus. Given this background, it is not surprising that they should quarrel; what is surprising is how foolish and bitter it was and the extent to which truth was sacrificed to the pithy epithet and the wounding jibe.

It all concerned a £10 donation to the Pope. The Pope needed money to defend the Papal States against Garibaldi and the Irish bishops organised a nation-wide collection on 17 June 1850. As was usual at the time, a list of contributors and the amount tendered was printed in the local papers. The Limerick Reporter alleged that in the list published by the Munster News, Francis Counihan had substituted his name against Maurice Lenihan’s donation of £10.

Over the following weeks the two traded insults. Counihan accused Lenihan of foul libels on him since the inception of the Munster News and referred to him as “unsophisticated Maurice” and “a Papal Ten Pounder.” Lenihan charged Counihan with “coarse vituperation, lying impertinence and violent, ruffianish language.” Counihan described Lenihan’s account as “a pile of the dirtiest verbiage in which a rat could burrow” and “as bereft of elegance as a foul heap of compost.”

Lenihan was cock-a-hoop when Counihan finally admitted that he had indeed substituted his name for Lenihan’s. “We have got him to confess after all!” The Kerry Badger is bagged at last, after throwing up an immense heap of dirt — which has fallen back on his own head.”
Returning insult with interest, he called Counihan "this small great man" and averred "We will not call him any worse than a half civilised and wholly unprincipled adversary, with a style as coarse as his brogue — he deserves to be thronged like a hound into something like decency. — We at once freely admit that we are unequal to him in slanging and downright Billingsgate ruffianism. There is a woman in Bohberbuoy, we understand, who comes near him."

The feud erupted again in 1862 when Thomas Stanley Tracy, the Assistant Editor of the Limerick Reporter, felt he had been insulted in the columns of the Munster News. The Reporter of September 26 carried Tracy’s riposte in a "very pungent letter which cut Counihan to the marrow." Lenihan and Tracy expected "a most vehement and vindictive response" from the Munster News and were nonplussed when all remained calm. Lenihan derided suggestions that he might be sued and even when Counihan’s writ for libel was served on him he "laughed to scorn" the offer that the writ would be withdrawn if an apology and donation of £50 to the poor were forthcoming. He consulted two QCs and his friend Archbishop Patrick Leahy of Cashel, but seems to have heard only what he wanted to hear and persisted in his obduracy. However as the court hearing loomed, he began to have second thoughts. Having consulted the Archbishop again, he agreed to apologise in the following terms.

Francis Counihan V.
Maurice Lenihan

APOLOGY
TO FRANCIS COUNIHAN ESQ.,
PROPRIETOR OF
THE MUNSTER NEWS

Sir, — Referring to a letter signed "A Constant Reader" which appeared in the Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator of the 26th day of September last year, grossly and falsely assailing your character, I hereby declare that the aspersions contained therein were utterly unfounded and unwarrantable; and expressing my great regret for the publication of same, I hereby undertake that henceforth, no imputation of any such description shall be inserted in my journal. In consideration of your foregoing the action of libel now pending at your suit against me, I undertake to pay all costs incurred by you, as also the costs of publication of this apology in the several Newspapers nominated by you.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
MAURICE LENIHAN

Lenihan had hoped that, relying on the goodwill of his fellow proprietors, he would be able to place the apology in the nominated papers free of charge or at a reduced rate. However Counihan was in no mood to be compassionate and extracted his pound of flesh by insisting that he (Counihan) would place them at the full rate.

Jerome Counihan

In 1870, still at 5 Rutland Street, the publisher’s name on the Munster News is now Francis Counihan & Son. This appears to mark the accession of Jerome Counihan, the eldest son and then 30 years old, to a senior position on the paper. Jerome was a man of energy and ability and very active in public life, including two consecutive terms as Mayor in 1882/83. He seems to have taken over the running of the paper from his father during the 1870s.

The paper moved to 51 George (now O’Connell) Street about 1880. Francis Counihan first appears in No. 51 in the 1881 revision of the Valuation Book. Consisting of a house, offices and yard, the rateable valuation of the premises is £59. By 1887 printing offices had been added and the valuation had increased to £28 with both Francis and Jerome listed as the occupiers.

The 1880s was a period of violent agitation for land reform in Ireland and Dublin Castle was concerned that some newspapers supported and encouraged the violence. In or about 1892 the Castle drew up a schedule of newspapers, recording their circulation, readership and their in-
fluence in the encouragement of violence. This records that the Munster News had a circulation of 5,000 among all classes but no particular influence on the agitation.\textsuperscript{22} Jerome died unexpectedly in October 1894 at the age of 54 and his father Francis Counihan who had a busy medical practice in Kinsale and became a JP\textsuperscript{23} Among the Munster News staff at Jerome's funeral\textsuperscript{24} was Mr M Moloney, manager; and a Mr Hugh Curran, M.I (Member of the Journalist's Institute). In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I assume that Mr Moloney continued as manager and Mr Curran acted as editor when Dr J F Counihan became proprietor.

The Jewish Controversy

The Munster News was never a crusading or controversial paper; with rare exceptions it was moderate to the verge of dullness. Both traits were well illustrated in the coverage of the 1904 controversy about Jews into Limerick city. The 1901 census counted 149 Jewish men, women and children in Limerick, among whom there were just 16 full and part-time peddlers.

Shopkeepers complained that they were losing business to these Jewish peddlers who told their goods from door to door on credit. It appears that a group of shopkeepers conveyed their concerns to Fr. John Creagh, the new Director of the Redemptorist Confraternity. It had a membership of thousands who attended weekly services, the highlight of which was the sermon by the Director. Fr Creagh embarked on a series of anti-Semitic sermons in early January 1904, referring to the Jews as "vipers" in his first sermon.\textsuperscript{25} In subsequent sermons he supported his anti-Semitic remarks by copious quotations from a 60 year old French history of the Church.\textsuperscript{26} Elsewhere, there were concerns about the rates of interest being charged by the peddlers and the steps taken to recover debts. Inevitably the two issues became conflated and attacks on Jews in the streets and a boycott of Jewish shops ensued. The affair attracted widespread newspaper attention at home and in England, where it was frequently described as arising solely from Catholic religious intolerance.

The Munster News was circumspect in its reporting of the sermons, the violence, the charges and counter-charges as the controversy escalated. It could not afford to offend the traders, source of its advertising revenue but neither did it want to lay itself open to accusations of anti-Semitism. So it adopted a detached attitude, reporting the sermons factually and without comment while the editorials were devoted to safe subjects such as "The Irish Butter Trade", "The University Question" and "The Building of Technical Schools." However, when a Jewish boy was sentenced to a month's imprisonment for throwing a stone that struck the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community in Limerick the Munster News\textsuperscript{27} denounced the severity of the sentence and the steps taken by the magistrate to prevent an appeal, a view generally shared by the public and press in Limerick.

The Protestant Bishop of Limerick then spoke in support of the Jews at the General Synod of the Church of Ireland.\textsuperscript{28} Bishop Bunbury's very partial account of events was based on what he had been told by Rabbi Levin, who he accepted at face value. The bishop referred to the "persecution of the Jews in Limerick" which was "instituted in the fulminations of a priest 

"Go, tell " that to the marines" was the advice given the bishop in relation to his claim that the peddlers did not charge a sufficient margin on the goods they purchased. The editorial ended by reminding Bishop Bunbury that "the days are gone when a Papist, ridden over by a Protestant fox hunter, should crawl, hat in hand, to beg his honour's pardon for having been in the horse's way.

A New Editor

My grandfather William Stanislaus (W S) Burke became editor of the Munster News about 1906.\textsuperscript{29} The son of Dr. Thomas Burke, he was born in Killaloe in 1859 and moved to Dublin in 1877.\textsuperscript{30} He began his career in journalism on the Freeman's Journal.\textsuperscript{31} In a lengthy obituary, the Limerick Leader\textsuperscript{32} stated he then worked in Bradford on the Catholic Herald where he mentored a young Frank McGillough, later a famous war correspondent. Gilded in a high degree with the poetic faculty, he had several of his poems published in The Shamrock and other Dublin publications of that period. He was back in Dublin in 1886\textsuperscript{33} with the Freeman's Journal in a literary capacity, greatly involved in the reprint of Eugene O'Sullivan's Sonnets of Irish Feetprint.\textsuperscript{34} By early 1901 he was in Limerick as the Freeman's Journal correspondent.\textsuperscript{35}

Arson

Number 51 O'Connell Street was set on fire in the early hours of July 1 1920.\textsuperscript{36} Tragically, Miss Minnie Counihan, a sister of Dr J F Counihan, who occupied a flat over the offices, sustained a broken arm and internal injuries when she jumped from a window and died of her injuries 12 days later. The fire brigade prevented the fire from spreading to the machine room but the editorial and commercial offices were completely destroyed, along with the entire files of the Munster News.

The damage caused by the fire was less than first thought. Since the type, the printing press and the gas engine, which powered the printing press, were not damaged the Munster News lost only one issue. The first issue after the fire carried an advertisement "business is carried on as if nothing had happened, the job printing business is in full swing."

The identity of the arsonists and their motives are uncertain. Newspaper censorship, in place under The Defence of the Realm Act, forbade the publication of any matter likely to cause conflict between the public and the military authorities. Hence the Limerick papers were very circumspect in their coverage. The Limerick Chronicle wrote, "as to the origin of the fire, nobody appears to be able to advance any theory or explanation." The only reference to the fire in the Limerick Leader was a report of a meeting of the Corporation during which the Mayor congratulated the Fire Brigade on their performance at the Munster News fire.

The Counihan and Burke families grew up in the belief that the Black and Tans were the perpetrators but there is no proof that this was so. Burke family lore had it that a group of masked men were responsible.\textsuperscript{37} The two statements are not necessarily incompatible but a "not proven" verdict seems to be appropriate.

W.S. Burke in 1943 when he was 84 years
The motive for the burning was even more mysterious. While critical of the government’s policies, the Munster News stayed well within the law and was moderate and even-handed. The two families have stories purporting to explain why the Tans burnt No.51 but none of them stand up to scrutiny. Both families believed that it resulted from the publication of a bishop’s letter criticizing the government. Bishops O’Dwyer and Hallinan and Cardinal Logue were mentioned as the writers but Bishop O’Dwyer had died in 1917. Bishop Hallinan wrote his letter in 1918 and Cardinal Logue’s letter on the Terror did not appear until 5 months after the fire. The Burkes also believed that the arson was a consequence of the paper denouncing the British forces for the Killaloa bridge murders but they also occurred 5 months later.

A New Owner

Dr John F Counihan had made a will in 1919 in which he left the Munster News to his son Edward for his life. The paper was then to pass to John Randal Counihan, the 8-year-old son of the deceased Frank Counihan, a brother of Edward. Unfortunately Edward contracted TB and by late 1921 it was evident that it was terminal. John Randal Counihan would not be in a position to assume the role of proprietor for many years to come and Dr John F decided to dispose of the paper to W S Burke. Unfortunately Dr John F took ill and died suddenly in Ennis in February 1922, as he was en route from Kilrush to Limerick to complete the legal formalities of the transfer. In fact, it was not until 1926 that the O’Connell Street valuation book reflected the change of ownership. Burke continued the designation of the publisher as Francis Counihan & Son.

Under W S Burke the Munster News maintained its moderate stance and was a staunch supporter of the Treaty. However, the paper became even more Catholic in tone with a strong social conscience. The negative impact of government policies on the poor was a frequent theme, especially in relation to housing. A sympathetic editorial on women’s demand for equal pay for equal work demonstrated an acute appreciation of changing attitudes in the wake of the War. An editorial on the end of a bitter dock strike was notable for an enlightened discussion on the balance between sectional needs and the common good. Over the years an increasing amount of the content was derived from the Vatican Fides News Service, especially during the 1930s.

Sudden Death

The Munster News came to an abrupt end on June 1 1935. Under an editorial on tuberculosis was a 3-line notice.

TO OUR READERS

The “Munster News” is ceasing publication and will not appear after this date.

The reason for the sudden closure is unknown but I think man and machinery were worn out. My grandfather had turned 75 and was going blind. His only surviving son was an ESB Engineer in Dublin with no interest in running the paper. Investment was needed to invigorate the paper and he didn’t have the money. It was all just too much.

The Munster News had struggled and nearly died at birth but against the odds it had survived and preserved the values of Francis Counihan’s 1851 Prospectus. It had met the test of the following decades so successfully that it outlived nine other Limerick papers launched during its lifetime. It had served the people of Limerick well for 84 years but it was time to go.

ABBREVIATIONS:

NLI: National Library of Ireland.
MN: Munster News.
LR & TV: Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator.
LC: Limerick Chronicle.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My thanks to Randal Counihan, Querria, for providing photographs for this article.

REFERENCES

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7. B Inglis, op. cit. passim.
8. M L Legg, op. cit 82/83.
9. A Dunlop Fifty Years of Irish Journalism 20.
10. LC 18 June 1895.
11. Maurice Lenihan, Reminiscences 120. See www.limerick.ie/archives/LCDA_Privatepapers/P4/P4_21_Walbyu
12. MN 5 July 1851.
15. Lenihan op. cit 123.
16. LR & TV 10 July 1860.
17. LR & TV 26 June 1860.
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19. LR & TV 29 June 1860.
20. MN 30 June 1860.
21. LR & TV 3 July 1860.
22. Lenihan, op. cit. 125 et seq.
23. See for example the Cork Examiner 2 March 1863.
26. LC 6 October 1894 and 18 June 1895.
27. I thank Paddy Waldron for this information.
28. LC 9 October 1894.
29. MN 13 January 1904.
31. MN 16 April 1904.
32. MN 29 & 23 April 1904. Dermot Reegh, Jews in 20th Century Ireland 47 et seq.
33. In the 1905 LC obituary of his mother, he is described as “W.S. Burke, Freeman’s Journal”. In 1907 he is listed as "editor of the Munster News" in the Archive of the Institute of Journalists on www.scoop-database.com/<http://www.scoop-database.com/>
34. Our father, Anthony Burke, told us that our widowed great grandmother and family moved to Dublin in 1877.
35. Limerick Weekly Echo obituary 12 February 1944.
36. Thomas Directory William Burke the occupier of 187 Catoole Road, Dublin.
37. Limerick Leader obituary 9 February 1944.
38. 1901 census.
39. LC 1 July 1920.
40. Information given by my father Anthony Burke to my brother Liam.
41. I thank Shane Counihan for a copy of the will.
42. I am indebted to Dr Frank Counihan for this information.