A case study of John Ferrar's Limerick Chronicle 1774

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There were at least ten newspapers printed in Limerick during the eighteenth century. The Limerick Chronicle, currently the longest running newspaper in Ireland, is Limerick's fourth newspaper. Editions of the Limerick Chronicle are stored in various repositories such as the British Library (London), the National Library (Dublin), the University of Limerick (holds the earliest editions) and Limerick City Library holds later editions from the nineteenth century. However, Limerick Museum holds seventy-five extant editions of the eighteenth century for the year 1774. It is these newspapers that are discussed below and they offer an insight into eighteenth century life as viewed by Limerick man John Ferrar. The Limerick Chronicle has had a number of printer/proprietors during its ongoing publication, but the first was John Ferrar and from the outset his stated aim was to make his newspaper 'everyday more and more useful and interesting.'

The Ferrar family name had links with the ancillary printing trades of paper making and bookbinding stretching back to the Renaissance period in Rome and to seventeenth century Huntingdon, England. From the 1720s the family in Limerick was linked with the connected printing trades of bookbinder and bookbinding. John Ferrar, born in 1745, was an author, printer/proprietor, bookseller and stationer in Limerick up to the 1790s when he moved to Dublin for family reasons. As an author his printed output included poetry, travel writing, political pamphlets on the Volunteers, education, parliamentary reform and a History of Limerick which went through two editions (1767 and 1787). In 1768 he commenced printing his newspaper and in 1780 he compiled Limerick’s first Trade Directory which offers a periodic snapshot of Limerick’s thriving urban centre. It included over 435 businesses among them drapers, vinters, grocers, tobacconists, hardware and earthenware merchants, shoemakers, book-sellers, stationers, mantua (cloak) makers, milliners, butchers, bakers, schools, lints, bleach yards, cabinet makers, Saddlers, smiths, printers, card makers and peruke (wig) makers.

In addition to his own works, Ferrar also printed upwards of twenty items including the work of some Catholic authors. His output incorporated the genres of religion, philosophy, literature, poetry, politics and a range of book catalogues for his own stock. He began printing his newspaper the Limerick Chronicle on 11 August 1768 in Quay Lane and remained its printer/proprietor until 1781 when he sold it to another Limerick man Andrew Watson as a going concern.

Ferrar subsidized his printing business with the sale of apothecary's goods and stationery items and both Andrew Welsh (printer/proprietor of Limerick's third newspaper the Munster Journal 1738-1772) and Ferrar as printer/proprietors were provided opportunities to scale the social ladder. During his tenure as printer/proprietor of the Limerick Chronicle, Ferrar became an agent for the distribution of English newspapers, a churchwarden at St. Mary's Cathedral, secretary for the House of Industry and printer for the municipal corporation between 1778 and 1779. He also played a role in the civic and political life of the city as a member of the Loyal Limerick Volunteers, sheriff in 1780 and an agent for the Insurance Office in 1785. By 1795 he was also a member of the Association for Disestablishing Vice and Promoting the Practice of Virtue and Religion. The content of his newspaper revealed a strong interest in education with constant references to Dublin, Cambridge and Oxford universities. In addition forty per cent of his advertisements of 1774 were linked to his book-selling business, which also promoted education for children.

Ferrar was a key figure in the expansion of the newspaper business in Limerick and its hinterlands, developing the model provided by Limerick's first serious newspaper printer Andrew Welsh since the 1740s. Indeed it should be noted that from 1768 onwards Limerick had two newspapers running simultaneously, Ferrar's Limerick Chronicle and Welsh's Munster Journal. His distribution network included strategically located urban and rural agents. In 1778 he advertised for riders to deliver his paper twice weekly to towns such as Ennis, Charleville, Tipperary and Nenagh. Only four weeks after the newspaper first appeared, Ferrar boasted that he had over 900 papers for posting, which involved a substantial number of subscribers. His expanding distribution network was broad and it suggests a growing awareness of the newspaper in many of the satellite towns around Limerick city. By 1774 his network had expanded and included towns such as Bruff, Kilmallock, Charleville, Mallow, Cork, Newport, Nenagh, Silvermines, Birr, Hospital, Tipperary, Skibbereen, Granahan, Killaloe, Rathkeale, Newcastlewest, Askeaton, Tarbert, Clonmel and Cashel. Like Welsh before him Ferrar continued to use the Limerick Assizes as a venue to deliver his goods to customers and indeed to collect monies due to him. He placed short notices in his newspaper to communicate with his customers noting that he would be:

At Ennis, where he will attend (God willing) and to his Clerks in other parts of the country to enable him to continue his Newspaper, which he doubts not, will be deemed material to Trade and Commerce, and necessary to convey Intelligence and advertisements from the city to the country. The success and increase of this Chronicle best speak its value and he flatters himself, that such Gentlemen as have honoured him with their advertisements have experienced that no Newspaper in Munster has more Readers.

Ferrar had to navigate an evolving commercial world in an age of patronage and deference and it would appear that he did so with some considerable adeptness. On 28 March 1774 Ferrar blamed the newly introduced Stamp Act for an increase in the price of his newspaper. He justified his request for payment of accounts due (which he was quite entitled to make) in two ways. Firstly by placing blame on the government, which of course was out of his control, and secondly, he used flattery and emphasized the impressive content of his newspaper. Other notices from Ferrar offer us further insights into aspects of the printing business during the eighteenth century and they reflect a piece meal progression and the increased need to streamline his day-to-day operation in order to provide an efficient and effective printing service. Following an earlier notice in 1786 in which Ferrar announced that all those who wished to advertise in his newspaper had to do was outline how long the advertisement should run. Examination of these advertisements suggests that there appears to be no limit to the number of repeat advertisements that were inserted in his newspaper. One year later in 1780 he announced that advertisements should have a minimum run of one month for the price of 1s 6d. Five years later in 1774 it would appear that the printing process had become time critical and Ferrar noted that those who wished to place advertisements needed to do so before 1 pm on Mondays and Thursdays only.

The layout of the Limerick Chronicle was very different to Welsh's Munster Journal, both in its appearance and the way in which Ferrar disseminated his news content. John Ferrar increased the size of his newspaper page, altered his font size,
added an extra column and in doing so he offered his readers 408 lines of printed text more than the *Muster Journal*. Indeed in 1769 Ferrar noted that he had purchased over 4000 small letters from London at the expense of £60 which could be used for advertising and therefore he could offer more favourable terms to his customers. Ferrar also used various forms of graphic ornamentation to differentiate his content and he grouped his advertisements under various headings.

The title bar of Ferrar's newspaper was also different to that of other eighteenth century provincial printer/proprietors, who relied heavily on their personal reputation. Printer/proprietors tended to include their names on the title bars but Ferrar went a step further and included an image of a castle (see illus). He was the only Limerick newspaper printer/proprietor to do so.

The use of the image is significant as it reflects how Ferrar saw his newspaper and where it was to be placed in Limerick's expanding market. This newspaper would not reflect the world of popular culture but that of the elite, the new middling sort clientele and those who could read. By linking his newspapers with the castle, a symbol of governance and status, Ferrar had created a perceived connection with those in power. It should be noted that during his tenure as printer/proprietor of the *Limerick Chronicle*, John Ferrar changed the title bar of his newspaper on several occasions but always included the image of the castle.

However, in 1780 when Ferrar became Sheriff, he removed the image in the title bar (see illus) and changed the title to read *Ferrar's Limerick Chronicle*, suggesting that Ferrar saw his role as printer/proprietor as something separate to that of his promotion into civic life.

When compared to its local competitor the *Limerick Chronicle* also, imported news in different ways. In 1774 55% of his newspaper was devoted to news and non-advertising items and 45% was set aside for advertising a broad range of goods. Unlike Andrew Welsh, John Ferrar placed both Limerick news items and advertisements on the front page of his newspaper as he noted that Limerick was as important as any other town. He assigned page two to advertising only, while pages three and four contained some advertising, but were primarily filled with literary extracts, letters to the printer, items of poetry and additional foreign news items. In 1774 the front page of the *Limerick Chronicle* contained short news items of varying length from ten to twenty lines. This resulted in news content being presented to its readers in a tapestry like fashion which weaved together a broad range of subjects including some parliamentary news, trade issues, high seas adventures, military and naval battles, weather reports, accounts of freak accidents, catastrophes, scientific discoveries, reports concerning crime, civic and state processions, funerals, illuminations, balls and culture, specifically the theatre. While his content continued to promote political and economic improvement, which had been the hallmark of Welsh's *Muster Journal*, John Ferrar's newspaper also reflected a strong emphasis on developing the mind.

According to Jon Stobart, urban centres in England developed at an unprecedented rate during the eighteenth century and urban economies, societies and cultures were transformed. The same could be said of Limerick, though the pace of this change was piecemeal. A significant aspect to this evolutionary change was the consumption of goods by both men and women in Limerick city and county. Without doubt, the selling of goods depended heavily on advertising through the print media, predominantly the bi-weekly newspapers in Limerick city. Ferrar's advertising reflects an increasing urban based readership and included advertisements for local drapers, apothecary shops, wine imports, grocery items such as tea and pastries, glassware and the new fashionable deluxe ware products, some locally produced but much of these items were imported.

A total of 74% of all reported news in the *Limerick Chronicle* in 1774 was devoted to what Ferrar termed as 'foreign news', with news from London, Europe and America. The political backdrop to much of the foreign news was the reporting and reaction of the British government and parliament to the 'Boston Tea Party', which had occurred on 16 December 1773.

News pertaining to the island of Ireland were differentiated with headings such as Dublin News, Country News and Limerick News and appeared to follow a predetermined template. These routine reports included notes on parliamentary discussions, military and civic appointments, civic proclamations, crime reports and the leisure activities of the elite in society. However, items classified as 'Dublin News' often reflected a geographic spread beyond Dublin and included material dealing with Belfast, Kilkenny, Clonmel, Cork, Strabane, Sligo, Roscommon and Waterford. Many of these were just short biographical notices. Limerick news items limited the same reporting framework and in 1774 John Ferrar kept his readers up to date with Limerick's civic appointments, military movements, biographical notices, the price of goods, port news and the assize of bread. He also continued to include regular notices concerning the physical improvement of Limerick city and county, including the establishment of turnpike roads, the promotion of the Shannon Navigation Scheme and the building of Limerick's House of Industry. Ferrar's reporting of social events focused primarily on concerts, assemblies, drums and theatre evenings all of which were generally run as fundraising events for the poor. Ferrar frequently inserted text highlighting the civic and benevolent behaviour of certain individuals and appears to be hinting that it is the kind of behaviour that eighteenth century society should emulate. For example, he noted that Mr. Nicholas Mahon, Merchant had donated two guineas, twenty yards of Ratteen and six yards of striped flannel, Mrs. Bishop Gore donated one guinea and shirts, shifts and caps. Mr. Hill received twelve pair of stockings from Caleb Powell all for the House of Industry. These reports were often no more than two lines of text. However, it is the frequency with which they appear that suggests a lasting influence.

While historians have generally mined newspapers for information on specific
events a more systematic analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how certain news items were selected and disseminated by printer/proponents. The size, placement and frequency of items of news reflected the thinking of printer/proponents like John Ferrar.

The reporting of American news became increasingly important during 1774 as tensions in the colonies rose. Initially, American news items were woven through a varied range of news content. However, four months after the 'Boston Tea Party' news from America became more formalized. Sources used in the Limerick Chronicle were taken from government announcements and predominantly American newspapers, such as the New York Gazette, Massachusetts Gazette, Pennsylvania Journal, Virginia Gazette, New York Times and the New England Gazette. Closer examination of the front page of the Limerick Chronicle reveals how the English government responded to the 'Boston Tea Party' and how it was reported locally. The reporting of the Boston Tea Party in Ferrar's newspaper is vague to say the least. Initially the coverage suggested that the colonists were nothing more than a mild irritable. Moreover, formal news channels dripped information concerning the unfolding events in America, newspaper proprietors like Ferrar were left to construct a newspaper from a variety of sources, not all of them reliable.

Much of the early coverage of the American news focused on the disloyalty of the colonists and reflected the fear of the possibility that they might use force against his majesty's troops. The March editions of the Limerick Chronicle clearly show that Britain's immediate response to the 'Boston Tea Party' was to send additional troops to Boston. On 17 March John Ferrar sailed from France, which illustrated how a show of force could quell a local disturbance;

We have received the agreeable news from Tours, that the people of that Place who committed to many excesses on account of the high price of corn And bread are returned to their duty, and that everything is quiet there. The report went on to say that another twenty seven villages in France had also been up in arms as a result of the high price of grain but that they had all been pacified after troops were dispatched to quell the riots. This suggests a manipulation of news items re-enforcing a point of view and to frame the newspaper in a specific way. In the same edition Ferrar included on page three an item of poetry, which reflected the 'obstinance of the Americans' who refused to succumb to the British Parliament's right to impose taxes on them. Indeed another poem in the same edition even hinted that the colonists might actually look for total separation.

In the same edition Ferrar inserted on the back page of the newspaper a notice which according to the source (London Gazette) had been posted up all over Bos-
ton in January of 1774, urging colonists to be ready to physically fight for their cause, a call to arms one might say. What is significant about this notice is its placement in the newspaper, sandwiched between a complete column of Limerick advertisements and a long article on a report of Government's decision. Ferrar had also included a detailed report on the high seas adventure of Captain Roche, commonly called Tyger Roach, a descendent of the Limerick Roches. What appears to be a random arbitrary placing of an item reflects a clever manipulation of the dissemination of news in an attempt to attract the eye of his Limerick advertisers and readers. The poster from Boston was printed with no introduction and no commentary. It was a stand-alone item. Interpretation was left open to the readers; however its placement offers an insight into the thinking of John Ferrar as printer/proponent.

The population of Limerick was predominantly Catholic and one of the most important pieces of British legislation passed in 1774 relevant to the Catholic population was the Quebec Act. The Quebec Act facilitated religious tolerance of Catholics and met with significant opposition from both British and Irish Protestant Elites. While John Ferrar favoured toleration of Catholics, he did not offer Limerick readers even basic information on the passing of the Quebec Act. Snippets of news concerning the Act appeared on the front page of the newspaper coverage in 1774 and then appeared primarily on the back page of his newspaper. In July of 1774 John Ferrar included a short news item on the front page classified under 'Dublin News'. It noted that the "Dissenters Bill, ought to be annexed as a codicil of the Quebec Law for the encouragement of the Papists." The report went on to say "when the monarch was to pass the Quebec Bill the universal shout was NO, Papists, NO, Popery." The use of capital letters on certain words makes them jump out at you when you first glance at the page: and the words No, Popery and the word PROTESTANT' religion are clearly intended to grab the readers' eye. Capital letters are not used in such a fashion anywhere else on the page and indeed were only used in advertisements. The item further stated that;

When General Wolfe conquered Quebec, the British soldiers carried the Standard of glory through Canada, little was it imagined that they were Sacrificing their own liberties, to set up the religion of our enemies in the Dominions of England, and pave a direct road to arbitrary government.

Clearly John Ferrar as printer/proponent produced a newspaper for his readers, and he noted "there will be more reading in one year to this Chronicle than in two guineas worth of any kind of books." His newspaper certainly contained a broad range of news items which were constructed, manipulated and framed in very specific ways. Many of the American news items appeared on the front page of the Limerick Chronicle and as noted earlier, they were predominantly snippets of information no more than twelve lines of printed text woven between news items from England and continental Europe as it was in these contexts that they were viewed by the eighteenth century reader.

Ferrar's newspaper pushed an agenda for improvement through his frequent reporting on fund raising charity events and the advertising of a broad range of goods. However, the newspaper offered opportunities for his personal advancement. It should not be forgotten that much of the products that Ferrar advertised as apothecary items and books were sold by him. It could be argued that with rising literacy levels, and an expanding middle-class readership and a complex distribution network, John Ferrar's Limerick Chronicle had a significant influence on Limerick society both urban and rural by 1774. Clearly John Ferrar thought he was doing the citizens of eighteenth century Limerick a service providing a newspaper. In 1774 he noted;

That the rich wouldn't think of losing a hundred pence on cards. While the poorest mechanic wouldn't think of wasting sixpence in The public house. Surely then, they will not think much of paying Two pence, halfpenny weekly, for a little food for the mind, and some Rationale amusement for a vacant hour, which probably may save some Persons trouble the sum by keeping them out of bad company.11

REFERENCES
1 The first newspaper was Thomas Brangan's Limerick Newsletter, 1716, followed by Andrew Welsh's Limerick Journal, 1739 and his Munster Journal, 1749.
5 Limerick Chronicle, 10, 28 March 1774.
6 Andrew Welsh's Limerick Journal had four pages of text and two columns, the page size was fourteen and half inches long, Welsh's Munster Journal, also had four pages of text, three columns, and he increased the size of his page to sixteen inches. John Ferrar increased the size of his newspaper page to seventeen and half inches.
7 Limerick Chronicle, 6 March 1789.
8 J. Ferrar, An History of Limerick, 1787.
10 Limerick Chronicle, 12 December 1774.
11 Limerick Chronicle, 17 March 1774.
12 Limerick Chronicle, 4 July 1774.
13 Limerick Chronicle, 4 July 1774.
14 Limerick Chronicle, 3 March 1774.
15 Limerick Chronicle, 28 March 1774.