‘Mysterious Malady Spreading’:  
Press Coverage of the 1918-19 influenza pandemic in Ireland.  

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The 1918-19 Influenza pandemic, commonly known as the ‘Spanish Influenza’, has been described as one of the most dramatic events of medical history. It has been ranked along with plague of Justinian and the Black Death as one of the most destructive human pandemics and was the single worst natural demographic disaster of the twentieth century. Although the exact mortality figures are unknown, ‘Spanish Influenza’ was responsible for the deaths of more people than World War I. The global death toll of the pandemic was estimated in 2002 to be approximately 50 million but could have been as high as 100 million.

In Ireland there were three distinct waves of influenza which occurred in June 1918, October 1918, and February 1919. Speaking in 1920, the Registrar-General for Ireland, Sir William Thompson stated:

Since the period of the Great Famine, with its awful attendant horrors of fever and cholera, no disease of any epidemic nature created so much havoc in any one year in Ireland as influenza.

It was evident from the figures that the 1918-19 pandemic was by far the most virulent epidemic in Ireland since 1864. The official death toll from influenza recorded in Ireland during the 1918-19 pandemic was 20,057; but it could have been as high

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1 Pete Davies, Catching cold: 1918's forgotten tragedy and the scientific hunt for the virus that caused it (London: 1999), p. 58.  
5 Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland for year ended 31 March 1919, [Cmd 1432], H. C. 1920, xxi, 1, p. xxxvii.  
7 Ibid., pp 176-7.
However despite this high mortality, the influenza pandemic in Ireland appears to have been forgotten.

Sensational reportage of recent epidemics such as SARS, AIDS and the ‘Bird Flu’ is thought to create what sociologist Peter Berger, calls a ‘cultural climate of pervasive anxiety’ in which certain groups become over-sensitive to alarms about health and lifestyle. Certainly in recent years there have been many articles with respect to ‘Bird Flu’. Generally these articles articulate the possibility of the H5N1 virus passing to humans and causing a major influenza pandemic on the scale of that of 1918-19. Recently the Daily Telegraph reported on 27 May 2008 that scientists believed ‘the H7 strain of bird flu was moving closer to developing the traits required to create an epidemic of the disease in humans’. In fact since the 1 June 2007, there have been 43 articles in The Irish Times alone, directly regarding ‘Bird Flu,’ and of these, 25 have appeared since 1 January 2008. Bearing in mind that the World Health Organization has attributed 241 deaths globally from ‘Bird Flu’ since 2003, the publicity would appear to be an over-reaction to a disease that has not reached epidemic proportions. This is in marked contrast to the reportage of ‘Spanish Influenza.’ Niall Johnston has argued that both British newspapers and medical press paid scant attention to domestic influenza during the pandemic. He suggested that interest was largely restricted to foreign reports, but that the high mortality during the second wave piqued an interest, which seems to have been disappointed by the relatively mild third wave of influenza.

This paper was born out of preliminary research in the local and national Irish newspapers with respect to how the influenza pandemic impacted on the province of Ulster. It is important to note that all of the newspapers have not yet been researched nor has a robust statistical analysis of their contents been carried out. However based on initial investigation of several local newspapers and preliminary statistics with respect to the Irish Times, the following paper will attempt to demonstrate how the pandemic was reported in Ireland, and if

8 Fifty-fifth detailed annual report of the Registrar-General (Ireland): with general abstract and summary of Marriages, Births, and Deaths in Ireland during the year 1918, [Cmd.450], H. C. 1919, x, 849, p. V; Fifty-sixth detailed annual report of the Registrar-General (Ireland): with general abstract and summary of Marriages, Births, and Deaths in Ireland during the year 1919, [Cmd.997], H. C. 1920, xi, 629, pp. v. and xxv.
9 David Aaronovitch, ‘Fever pitch: Once it was the chicken virus, then Ebola, now it’s Sars. We worry too much.’ The Observer, 6 April 2003
10 The Daily Telegraph, 27 May 2008

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the coverage—or lack thereof—was a contributory factor in its subsequent removal from Irish History.

A newspaper article in 2003 reported the recollections of a survivor the 1918 pandemic, Molly Deery from Lifford, Donegal. She recalled that influenza: "hit very hard and the people were very fearful and frightened of it," "You see the people had no idea what caused it. I'm not sure of the exact numbers of victims as we didn't read newspapers in them times.” However she recalled that "It was a terrible, terrible flu though, and people were told to keep to one side of the road if someone in a house had it.” Molly’s recollections articulated the great fear and anxiety created by influenza as well as the concern that it might not in fact be influenza at all. The mystery surrounding the disease was evident in the first articles that appeared in Irish newspapers and one of the earliest references to influenza was in the Irish Times on 31 May 1918 under the headline ‘Mysterious Maladies’ and was with respect to Spain.14

Indeed it was Spain’s neutrality during World War I that led to the misnomer Spanish Influenza. As there was no wartime censorship in Spain incidents of influenza in that country were published in newspapers worldwide giving the mistaken impression that the pandemic originated there.15 Regardless of its origin, there was uncertainty as to what this mysterious disease was. Some of the Irish newspapers picked up on this ambiguity and during the first wave of the pandemic in June 1918, influenza was described by some in Belfast as ‘trench fever,’ which was a disease caused by lice to soldiers in the trenches during the World War I. Although this theory was rejected by doctors at the time, it was seized upon by the Irish News as the appearance of influenza coincided with the return of discharged soldiers.16 The Derry Journal described influenza as a ‘mystery illness’ and enquired ‘is the malady directly due to the war?’ It stated:

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13 The People, 11 May 2003
14 The Irish Times, 31 May 1918

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These questions have not been settled by any definite reply from those in a position to speak with authority, but by many the swiftly-gripping ailment is set down as a form of “trench fever.”

On the 29 June 1918, The Ulster Herald under the headline ‘Mysterious Malady Spreading’ advised that ‘The mysterious influenza plague that made its appearance in Belfast over a week ago has spread to Dublin.’ Again during the first wave, on 6 and 13 July 1918, articles in the same paper referred to influenza as ‘the plague’, as did news items in the Irish Independent during June and July of 1918. During the second wave in November 1918, the Dungannon Democrat reported that: ‘It can be seen that this is no ordinary influenza but some form of disease which up to the present baffles the best skill of medical men.

It was not just the Irish newspapers that were sceptical with respect to influenza and during the second wave in October 1918, English newspaper, the Daily News, ran the headline ‘Influenza Theories -Soldiers Say it is Trench Fever.’ It reported that some soldiers believed the disease was exactly like trench fever while others thought it was a form of malaria. The London Times too speculated in October 1918 ‘that a high medical authority states that the disease is directly traceable to the German use of poison gas, the after effects of which have induced growth of a new type of streptococcus.’ By October 1918, American magazines were describing influenza as an ‘enemy’, a ‘mysterious malady’ a ‘momentous peril’ and a ‘scourge’.

The Irish News promoted the suggestion that influenza was something more sinister and was directly caused by war. In an editorial on 12 July 1918 it described influenza as a ‘virulent infectious “poison,”’ and suggested that the disease had originated in the trenches. It quoted a Dublin doctor, home on leave from the war, who said:

17 Derry Journal, 26 Jun. 1918
18 The Ulster Herald, 29 Jun 1918
19 The Ulster Herald, 6 Jul 1918, 13 Jul 1918
20 Irish Independent, 24 Jun 1918, 25 Jun 1918, 9 Jul 1918, 10 Jul 1918
21 Dungannon Democrat, 13 Nov 1918
22 The Daily News, 29 Oct. 1918
23 The Times, 10 Oct. 1918

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He has found within the past week several cases of “influenza” in which the “symptoms” are very similar to those observed in soldiers who were “gassed” in the trenches. The symptoms were ‘far milder of course but startlingly alike in many respects.\(^\text{25}\)

Meanwhile in America wild rumours flourished that the Germans used influenza as a form of ‘germ warfare’, that was started deliberately in theatres and cinemas by German agents put ashore from U-boats.\(^\text{26}\)

It was true that influenza was associated with the war but only insofar as the war may have caused the spread of the disease but Jay Winter has argued that it was not a factor in its virulence.\(^\text{27}\) The nationalist newspapers’ scepticism and concern with respect to influenza may have been genuine. However the Irish News and Derry Journal’s implication that the war and returning soldiers were linked to influenza no doubt aided the anti-conscription campaign, a cause that united both Sinn Féin and the Irish Parliamentary Party during this period.\(^\text{28}\) This along with the constant reference to influenza in Irish nationalist and Sinn Féin papers such as the Derry Journal and the Ulster Herald as ‘plague;’\(^\text{29}\) ‘scourge’\(^\text{30}\) and ‘mysterious malady’\(^\text{31}\) could only have helped to increase the fear and suspicion of the disease.

In contrast, Unionist run newspapers, while also questioning what the disease might actually be, attempted to play down its effects. The County Down Spectator on 29 June 1918, reported: ‘How the complaint got its name is not quite clear for it is neither Spanish nor influenza.’ However unlike the nationalist newspapers it criticised public over-reaction to the disease with:

\(^{25}\) Irish News, 12 Jul 1918.
\(^{26}\) Crosby, America’s forgotten pandemic, p. 47 and Davies, Catching cold, p. 82.
\(^{28}\) Sinead McCoole, No ordinary women: Irish female activists in the revolutionary years 1900-1923 (Dublin, 2003), pp 66-7.
\(^{29}\) Ulster Herald, 6 Jul 1918; 13 Jul 1918 (Ulster Herald – Pro-Sinn Féin newspaper); Derry People, 6 Jul 1918; ( Although the Derry Journal was originally a unionist newspaper by this period is was a Nationalist paper) Hugh Oram, The newspaper book: a history of newspapers in Ireland, 1649-1983 (Dublin, 1983), , p.35
\(^{31}\) Derry Journal, 26 Jun 1918, 6 Nov 1918 and Ulster Herald, 29 Jun 1918.
Needless to say, there has, as usual been no lack of scaremongers to magnify the outbreak into a very epidemic of chronic influenza. This it certainly is not, though from its contagious character cases are to be found generally in little groups.\(^{32}\)

Meanwhile the *Belfast News-Letter* declared that many exaggerated stories had been spread in the city but there was no cause for alarm.\(^{33}\) Similarly newspapers like the *Northern Whig* and *Belfast Telegraph* also minimised the effects of the first wave of influenza in Belfast.\(^{34}\) Janice Hume has claimed that the silences in certain publications around epidemics are equally enlightening as the coverage. She found that many of the popular contemporary American magazines did not contain any articles on influenza. She argued that it was easier to report on war were there were identifiable protagonists and that editors might be dissuaded on focusing on a serious domestic crisis when the country was dealing with the war and its aftermath.\(^{35}\) This would appear to be the tack taken by some local newspapers in Ulster, as the *Down Recorder*, *Northern Constitution*, *Ulster Gazette* and the *Ulster Guardian* did not mention influenza at all during the first wave of the pandemic which may have been an attempt to minimise the disease in order to raise morale and thus help the war effort.

Sandra Tomkins claimed that another way in which morale was kept raised was by minimising the death toll and threat of influenza in Britain, while reporting the widespread adverse effect of the disease on Germany and Austria.\(^{36}\) A similar approach appeared to have been taken by Irish newspapers with Unionist sympathies. Between the 5 and 8 July 1918, there were five articles in the *Irish Times* that reported how the disease was reaching epidemic proportions in both Germany and Austria.\(^{37}\) On 29 June 1918 the Unionist *County Down Spectator* reported somewhat inaccurately that:

The influenza epidemic which we are experiencing in the North-East of Ireland is very prevalent in the German trenches and it is stated to be working great havoc there. The

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\(^{32}\) *The County Down Spectator*, 29 June 1918

\(^{33}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 11 Jun 1918


\(^{35}\) Hume, “The “forgotten””, p 907

\(^{36}\) Sandra Tomkins, *Britain and the Influenza Epidemic 1918-1919* (Unpublished PhD), 1989, p 32

\(^{37}\) *The Irish Times*, 4 Jul 1918, 5 Jul 1918, 8 Jul 1918.
health of the British and the American troops on the other hand is uniformly good, and the influenza scourge has not made its appearance in our camps or trenches.\textsuperscript{38}

During the second wave, columns of reports on how influenza was affecting various Irish towns would often be finished off with an account on the seemingly large casualties in European cities such as Vienna.\textsuperscript{39} Debra Blakely has claimed that by framing foreign influenza epidemics as being more severe, indirectly associated the blame for the disease on the said foreign country.\textsuperscript{40} It has also been argued that the perceived scale of the impact elsewhere made the impact on Britain seem trivial'.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore placing the emphasise on countries such as Germany may have been an attempt, firstly to downplay the effect of the pandemic in the United Kingdom by stressing the huge influenza casualties in foreign cities, and secondly associated the disease with the enemy.

In general, coverage of the pandemic in Irish Newspapers was sparse. Reports on the progress of the war dominated Unionist run newspapers; stories about the political prisoners held in Irish and English prisons took precedence in Sinn Féin run newspapers, while the General Election in December 1918 took priority in all newspapers during the height of the more virulent second wave. Data was collected with respect to the number of influenza related articles that appeared in the \textit{Irish Times} during the three waves of the pandemic. During the first wave of the pandemic, 24 news items in the newspaper mentioned influenza, and of these, only 13 referred to the pandemic in Ireland. During the more virulent second wave, 62 news items with respect to influenza appeared, of which 39 referred to the disease in Ireland. It was also during this period that reports appeared in all newspapers recounting the human tragedy of the disease.

On the 30 November 1918, the \textit{Northern Constitution} reported on the tragic deaths in Upperlands, Maghera of John McGuckin’s four daughters, two of whom were married, and had left small families. James Kirkpatrick’s son died and the other nine members of his family were so seriously ill that they were unable to attend the funeral. John Shiels’ wife died

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{The County Down Spectator}, 29 June 1918
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Belfast News-Letter}, 30 Oct 1918, Ulster Guardian, 2 Nov 1918
\textsuperscript{40} Debra E Blakely, \textit{Mass Mediated Disease: A case study Analysis of Three Flu Pandemics and Public Health Policy}, (Plymouth: 2007), p 56.
\textsuperscript{41} Niall Johnson, \textit{Britain and the 1918-19 influenza Pandemic: A Dark Epilogue} (London: 2006), p 164

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leaving four small children, and he and family were also ill. John Lavery’s eldest son aged 17 died as did John Ferguson, also 17.42 Towards the end of October 1918 the *Lurgan Mail* recounted how Mrs Bridget Dynes of Brownlow Terrace, Lurgan and the head of her family, had died on the Saturday, her daughter aged 23 on Monday, and her son aged 25 on Wednesday.43 The *Newry Reporter* among other newspapers reported the tragedy of James Mc Ardle, a Newry merchant, who lost three of his children—Margaret, aged 20; Peter, aged 16, and James, aged 22—to influenza within a few days of each other while the remaining members of the family were also suffering from the disease.44 In January 1919, the *Ulster Guardian* reported a tragedy in Crossgar Co Down where Jenny Ringland aged 17 died on 29 December. She was the fifth child of the family to fall victim to Influenza. Her brother David aged 16 died on 21 December, her sister Maggie aged 6 on 22 December, her brothers John aged 19 on Christmas Day and James aged 3 on St Stephen’s Day.45 These deaths bear witness not only to the human devastation caused to families and communities but also to one of the global peculiarities of the pandemic; the disease mainly targeted young adults in particular.

During the second and third waves local disruptions such as the closure of schools and cancellations of meetings were advised via public notices, or one or two lines to that effect, in both local and national newspapers. Also prevalent during these waves were the newspaper reports distributing medical advice with respect to influenza. During late October and early November 1918, articles listing recommendations to prevent influenza, appeared in newspapers including the *County Down Spectator* and *Belfast News-Letter*.46 There were also articles with respect to the recommendations of Sir Charles Cameron and Dr H W Baillie, Medical Superintendent Officers of Health for Dublin and Belfast respectively, as well as those of the Local Government Board.

Throughout all waves of the pandemic, advertisements were prevalent in both national and local Irish newspapers indicating that although editors may not have thought it prudent to report on influenza, that businessmen saw their opportunity to cash in on the crisis. In fact

42 *Northern Constitution*, 30 Nov 1918
43 *Lurgan Mail*, 26 Oct 1918
45 *Ulster Guardian*, 4 Jan 1919
46 *County Down Spectator*, 2 Nov 1918, *Belfast News-Letter*, 29 Oct 1918,

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during the second wave the *Irish Times* had 49 advertisements with respect to influenza remedies as opposed to 39 news items on the pandemic in Ireland. Indeed during the third wave, 43% of references to influenza in the *Irish Times* were via advertisements. A vast assortment of products claimed to have curative or preventative powers against influenza and some such as Formamint tablets were happy to exploit public fears in their advertising campaigns. As early as June 1918 an advert appeared in both national and local papers for Formamint, which asserted by way of a ‘Public Notice’ on the ‘Spanish Influenza Epidemic’ its preventative powers against the disease using official statements supplied by the chief medical officer of the Local Government Board to add extra authority to their claims.\(^{47}\)

Likewise, a nationally established disinfectant proclaimed ‘Guard against Influenza by the daily use of Jeyes’ Fluid,’\(^{48}\) and Lifebouy soap claimed to be a ‘reputable germicide and sure disinfectant.’\(^{49}\) Local firms too advertised disinfectants as footnotes to articles on influenza in the *Belfast News-Letter*.\(^{50}\) Oxo and Bovril, nowadays best known as ingredients for gravy, were popular beef teas of the day and were alleged to fortify the body against the onslaught of infection.\(^{51}\) Oxo declared that it ‘fortifies the system against influenza infection’,\(^{52}\) while Bovril claimed that it had ‘Body-building powers that were 10 to 20 times the taken amount.’

As a ‘prevention and cure of influenza’ people were advised to ‘Gargle with Condy’s Remedial Fluid,’\(^{53}\) and Belfast tobacco firm, Gallaher recommended their High Toast Snuff ‘To prevent influenza or colds in the head.’\(^{54}\) Although this claim may seem far fetched, it was not as outlandish as it first may seem as one of the recommendations to avoid influenza was ‘Make yourself sneeze night and morning.’ It would seem that everyone wanted to get on the act and during the second wave in November 1918, a Belfast butcher proclaimed ‘defy the ‘Flu - Finlay’s Meat Costs less than the doctor.’\(^{55}\) However it was the Dunlop Rubber Company who made the most questionable of links as they extolled the virtues of cycling

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\(^{47}\) *The Times*, 28 June 1918; *Irish Times*, 1 Jul 1918; *Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 2 Jul 1918.

\(^{48}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 5 Mar 1919.


\(^{50}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 30 Oct 1918, 31 Oct 1918, 7 Nov 1918, 12 Nov 1918.

\(^{51}\) Lori Loeb, ‘Beating the Flu: Orthodox and Commercial Responses to Influenza in Britain, 1889–1919’ *Social History of Medicine* 18:2 (2005), p 220

\(^{52}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 19 Feb 1919.


\(^{54}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 Jun 1918 and *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 Nov 1918.

\(^{55}\) *Irish News*, 8 Nov 1918.
with ‘Very few of the people who’ve had influenza are regular cyclists. Those who bicycle regularly have been less liable to attack.’

In conclusion, the reportage of influenza in Irish newspapers bore many similarities with that of the rest of Britain. British newspapers attempted to keep morale boosted especially during the first wave by downplaying the extent or virulence of the disease. Unionist run newspapers appeared to follow suit, but in contrast both Sinn Féin and nationalist newspapers depicted influenza as a ‘plague,’ ‘scourge,’ or ‘mysterious malady’ and associated it with the war and soldiers returning to Ireland from the western front. The virulent second wave, however elicited reports from all newspapers on the many human tragedies that were taking place right across Ireland. Although it may appear from the examples given that there were many articles on influenza the fact is that the examples used are from numerous newspapers over a one year period during which over 20,000 people in Ireland died of the disease. In reality, articles were infrequent in both the national and local newspapers and most references to influenza were with respect to advertisements for products that in some cases bore no relation to the disease.

The Spanish Influenza Pandemic has been described by Alfred Crosby as the ‘forgotten pandemic.’ Undoubtedly, World War I contributed to worldwide amnesia of the disease and theories regarding the absorption of the event into the collective memory of the war have validity. In all probability, the political upheaval in Ireland during this period—and subsequently—was also a major factor in the Irish amnesia with respect to the influenza pandemic. However, Janice Hume argued that mass media claim an important role in building public consciousness. Therefore it would be reasonable to suggest that along with the other very valid reasons for the amnesia with respect to this pandemic, that the paucity of press coverage may also be a factor in why Spanish Influenza has been ignored and forgotten in Ireland.

57 Crosby, America’s forgotten pandemic
59 Janice Hume, ‘The “forgotten” 1918 influenza epidemic, p 910

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