

Celebrating the Battle of the Saintes: Imperial News in England and Ireland, 1782*

The same wind that wafted on one of its wings the defeat of the French fleet in the West Indies, attended with a slaughter and carnage hitherto unknown, conveys the happy tidings of IRELAND'S EMANCIPATION on the other, balanced in the calm air of STEADINESS and UNANIMITY. English valour has triumphed over French pride, and Irish perseverance has broken England's *stubbornness*.

Freeman's Journal, 21 May 1782

AS NEWS of Admiral George Rodney's stunning victory over the French fleet at Les Saintes in the Caribbean in April 1782 broke in Ireland, so too did word of Westminster's repeal of the Dependency of Ireland on Great Britain Act (6. Geo. I, c. 5, also known as the Declaratory Act of 1719). The ebullient pronouncement in the *Freeman's Journal* illustrates the apparent contradiction between the applause by patriotic, antigovernment newspapers for Rodney's imperial victory, and the celebration of Dublin's independence from Westminster. As Stephen Conway has noted, this enthusiasm for British success seems "odd," particularly as the Irish Protestant minority had been pulling away from Britain over the course of the American war.¹ Yet this paradox, placed against its contemporary networks that passed information from the margins of empire to the metropole and to Ireland, provides an opportunity to examine how imperial news interacted with local politics and shaped imperial sensibilities. Rely-

*This essay is based on my Master of Research dissertation (Macquarie University, 2014). I wish to thank my supervisor Dr. Kate Fullagar, whose insights and support contributed to its development.

1. Stephen Conway, "'A Joy Unknown for Years Past': The American War, Britishness, and the Celebration of Rodney's Victory at the Saints," *History* 86:282 (April 2001): 196.

ing on a comparison of the newspaper coverage of the Saintes and the ensuing celebrations in a selection of London, Dublin, and Belfast newspapers, this essay thus takes the battle—a largely forgotten event in the American war—as a transnational case study in the history of imperial news.

The victory at the Saintes has received little scholarly attention. Military historians have analyzed the innovative tactics that Rodney and his captains employed during the battle, but few historians have paused to consider the wider significance of the events of April 1782.² Until Conway's essay on the Saintes in a British context and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy's reexamination of events preceding Yorktown, American and British historiography had largely overlooked the battle. Conway reviewed the celebrations that followed Rodney's victory in his investigation of the ways in which the American conflict stimulated and redefined a popular sense of Britishness. He argued that the "enthusiastic celebrations of the Saintes . . . are explicable only when one recognises that Britishness itself was both reconfigured and given a great boost during the American war."³ O'Shaughnessy examined Rodney and the Saintes in his scholarship on the American Revolution in the context of the British Atlantic. His work has focused on the strategic and practical impact of Rodney's victory and on other British activities in the Caribbean as they related to developments in the fledgling United States.⁴ Most recently, Brad Jones included the Saintes in his doctoral thesis on popular loyalism in the British Atlantic during the American revolutionary period. Jones examined how the war and revolutionary ideology affected the ways in which Britons living throughout the Atlantic world understood and articulated their loyalty to Great Britain. According to his assessment, the victory at the Saintes was "constructed as the defin-

2. See, most recently, Peter Trew, *Rodney and the Breaking of the Line* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006); Christopher J. Valin, *Fortune's Favorite: Sir Charles Douglas and the Breaking of the Line* (Tucson, AZ: Fireship Press, 2009).

3. Conway, "Joy Unknown," 181.

4. Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, "The Other Road to Yorktown: The St. Eustatius Affair and the American Revolution," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 97:1 (Spring 2002): 33–59; O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

ing moment in the American war for Britain's Atlantic world inhabitants," who celebrated the victory as exuberantly as those in Britain.⁵

The Saintes has thus been considered—if minimally—from diverse historiographical perspectives spanning military history, the identity politics of Britain during the American war, and the context of the revolutionary Atlantic. This case study adopts a different approach that is transnational in nature—placing the Saintes and the ensuing celebrations within the framework of new imperial history and “British world” scholarship—two methodologies that have recently begun to converge.⁶ As Zoë Laidlaw has noted, recent works influenced by new imperial history “range far beyond dissections of metropolitan society and culture, focusing on interactions between widely separated colonial sites, juxtaposing micro and macro, and questioning the relationship between the remarkable and the everyday.”⁷

In relation to Ireland Niall Whelehan has recently argued that “transnational approaches overlap with empire and globalization in new approaches to the ‘British world,’ of which Ireland was very much a part.”⁸ Enda Delaney, in advocating a transnational history of late modern Ireland, drew attention to scholarship that has “sought to fuse” the “previously disconnected spheres” of domestic, imperial, and colonial history in seeking to assess the impact of the empire on

5. Brad A. Jones, “The American Revolution and Popular Loyalism in the British Atlantic World” (Ph.D. diss., University of Glasgow, 2006), 217.

6. On new imperial history, see Catherine Hall, “Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial, Thinking the Empire,” in *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 6; Kathleen Wilson, “Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2; Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, “Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire,” in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8. On British world scholarship, see Tamson Pietsch, “Rethinking the British World,” *Journal of British Studies* 52:2 (April 2013): 441–63.

7. Zoë Laidlaw, “Breaking Britannia’s Bounds? Law, Settlers, and Space in Britain’s Imperial Historiography,” *Historical Journal* 55:3 (Sept. 2012): 811.

8. Niall Whelehan, “Playing with Scales: Transnational History and Modern Ireland,” in *Transnational Perspectives on Modern Irish History*, ed. Niall Whelehan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 10.

modern Britain.⁹ Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, among others, have argued that in challenging the traditional focus on center-and-periphery relations, scholars have sought to emphasize the importance of connections across empire, the webs and networks that have operated between colonies, and the significance of centers outside the metropole.¹⁰ By including nonmetropolitan voices and by considering connections not just between metropole and colony but also between individual colonial sites, this methodology has resulted in a far more nuanced view of the place of empire in Britain's past and indeed the place of empire in other imperial sites. The inclusion of Ireland in this case study responds to calls by scholars of Irish Studies to widen their focus in the analysis of Ireland's engagement with the British empire by taking new imperial history across the Irish Sea.¹¹

Elucidating this transnational history means engaging directly with the press networks on which these connections were built. Scholars of eighteenth-century newspapers have only recently begun to consider in greater depth the routes along which information traveled around the British empire.¹² Simon Potter, Alan Lester, and Michael de Nie have all used newspapers to great effect in considering the transfer of information around the empire; their work, however, has focused on the nineteenth century.¹³ In her critique of the British-world scholar-

9. Enda Delaney, "Our Island Story? Towards a Transnational History of Late Modern Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 37:148 (Nov. 2011): 603.

10. Hall and Rose, "Being at Home," 8. James Livesey's recent account of Ireland and Scotland in the Atlantic world also sheds light on the attitude toward empire among inhabitants of towns far from the center of political power. See Livesey, *Civil Society and Empire: Ireland and Scotland in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 22.

11. Michael de Nie, "'Speed the Mahdi!': The Irish Press and Empire during the Sudan Conflict of 1883–1885," *Journal of British Studies* 51:4 (Oct. 2012): 884.

12. Pietsch, "Rethinking the British World," 441–63. See also M. H. Beals, "The Role of the *Sydney Gazette* in the Creation of Australia in the Scottish Public Sphere," preprint, 2 Feb. 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.944593>, forthcoming in *Historical Networks in the Book Trade*, ed. John Hinks and Catherine Feely (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016).

13. Alan Lester, "British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 54 (Autumn 2002): 24–48; Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Simon J. Potter, "Introduction: Empire, Propaganda and Public Opinion," in *Newspapers and Empire in Ireland and Britain: Reporting the British Empire*

ship of the 1990s Tamson Pietsch argued that despite the focus of such historians on networks of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century empire, their work had—in the main—failed to trace the operation of those networks or to consider the “systems and institutions that created, sustained, and conditioned them.”¹⁴ In the context of press history this focus on networks represents a return of sorts to the structural components of print that originally dominated the field during the twentieth century, albeit in a way that broadens a framework that often emphasized the mechanics of production and distribution.¹⁵

THE SAINTES AND ITS INITIAL REPORTAGE

In April 1782 Jamaica was on a war footing in anticipation of a Franco-Spanish invasion. After the conclusion of the American war six months earlier, the imperial powers had diverted their attention to the Caribbean, which became the site of a marked escalation of hostilities. According to a Montego Bay planter, “people in general were under the greatest alarm in consequence of the threatened attack from the enemy.”¹⁶ John Mair’s plantation on nearby Dominica afforded him an uninterrupted view of Les Saintes, a group of small islands in a passage between Dominica and Guadeloupe. Mair witnessed the escalation of military activities in the region: “When that immense Spanish fleet formed a junction with the French, the ocean seemed covered with them and the coast of our island particularly exhibited a grand sight.”¹⁷ On 9 April the British fleet in the Carib-

c. 1857–1921, ed. Simon J. Potter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 11–22; de Nie, “Speed the Mahdi,” 883–909.

14. Pietsch, “Rethinking the British World,” 445.

15. Arthur Aspinall, *Politics and the Press, c. 1780–1850* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1949); Robert Munter, *The History of the Irish Newspaper, 1685–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987); Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987; London: Taylor and Francis, 2011, Kindle edition); Jeremy Black, “The Press and Politics in the Eighteenth Century,” *Media History* 8:2 (Dec. 2002): 175–82.

16. *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (hereafter cited as *MC*), 22 May 1782.

17. Gwyn Jenkins, ed., *John Mair’s Journals* (Aberystwyth: University College of Wales, 1976), 35.

bean, headed by Admiral Rodney, intercepted the French fleet led by the Comte de Grasse. After maneuvering for three days the battle commenced at daybreak on 12 April. The fleets exchanged fire for nearly an hour and a half before Rodney broke through the enemy's line.¹⁸ Gilbert Blane, Rodney's surgeon aboard the British flagship, described HMS *Formidable* breaking the French line "by bursting through it, going within short pistol-shot of the last enemy's ship we passed."¹⁹ The battle continued all day. According to Rodney, the engagement ended "after a battle which lasted with unremitting fury from seven in the morning till half-past six in the evening, when the setting sun put an end to the contest."²⁰ The victory was comprehensive, as the British fleet sank four French ships, captured the fleet's flagship, the *Ville de Paris*, and took the Comte de Grasse prisoner. According to Captain James Cranstoun of the *Formidable*, the scene on the *Ville de Paris* was "altogether terrible." When Cranstoun boarded the ship, he encountered a deck "still covered with dead and wounded, [and] only de Grasse himself remained still standing, together with two or three other persons."²¹

It took five weeks for news of the British victory at the Saintes to reach London. Rodney drafted his reports to the Admiralty two days after the battle and dispatched two of his captains to London to deliver the news. They arrived in the early hours of Saturday, 18 May. By eight o'clock that morning Lady Rodney had received notes from the Admiralty acquainting her with the news of her husband's victory.²² One of Rodney's daughters recounted the events of the day in a letter to her father: "In a very little time after, all London was in uproar; the whole town was illuminated that night. We were at the play. When we went in, the whole house testified, by their claps

18. James Grant, *Journal of HMS St. Albans*, 4 Dec. 1780–28 July 1783 (Add. MS 45124, fol. 47, British Library).

19. Gilbert Blane, *Account of the Battle between the British and French Fleets in the West Indies on the Twelfth of April, 1782, in a Letter to Lord Dalrymple, British Minister at the Court of Warsaw, April 22, 1782* (London, 1782), 6.

20. *London Gazette* (hereafter cited as *LG*), 14–18 May 1782.

21. Henry B. Wheatley, ed., *The Historical and the Posthumous Memoirs of Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall, 1772–1784*, 5 vols. (London: Bickers and Son, 1884), 2:322.

22. Miss Rodney to Admiral George Rodney, 27 May 1782, in G. B. Mundy, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of the Late Admiral Lord Rodney*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830), 2:308–9.

and huzzas, the joy they felt at the news and their love for you. Their acclamations lasted for, I am sure, five minutes. You may judge how happy we are.”²³ As the official journal of record and the newspaper of the crown, the *London Gazette* was the first to publish the official dispatches. News of the Saintes appeared in the publication that evening when Rodney’s messages to the Admiralty were reproduced in full.²⁴ Over the coming days these dispatches were reprinted verbatim in metropolitan and regional newspapers throughout England and Ireland—an example of the scissors-and-paste journalism prevalent during the eighteenth century.²⁵

London and Dublin in the 1780s had a vibrant culture of news consumption supplied by newspapers competing in increasingly crowded markets. By 1783 London boasted nine daily newspapers and ten bi- or tri-weekly publications; ten newspapers were being published in Dublin.²⁶ Virtually all London newspapers in the 1780s claimed circulations well beyond the metropolis, enabling them to possess a near-universal national reach.²⁷ London readership may have attained a quarter of a million by 1782, a third of the population.²⁸ Of the English newspapers included in this study, two were dailies: the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*. The remaining three—the *British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, the *London Gazette*, and the *London Chronicle*—appeared on a

23. *Ibid.*, 309.

24. *LG*, 14–18 May 1782.

25. Catherine Feely, “‘Scissors-and-Paste’ Journalism,” in *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Ghent: Academia Press and London: British Library, 2009), 561; M. H. Beals, “Musings on a Multimodal Analysis of Scissors-and-Paste Journalism (Part 1),” *M. H. Beals: Historian of Migration and Media* (blog), 26 March 2014, <http://mhbeals.com/musings-on-a-multimodal-analysis-of-scissors-and-paste-journalism/>.

26. James Raven, “The Book Trades,” in *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays*, ed. Isabel Rivers (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 24–26; Brian Inglis, *The Freedom of the Press in Ireland, 1784–1841* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 21; Padhraig Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism, and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 28–33; Black, *English Press*, 9–10.

27. Troy Bickham, *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as Seen through the British Press* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 12.

28. Uriel Heyd, *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 21.

weekly, bi-weekly, or tri-weekly basis.²⁹ The three Irish newspapers addressed here—the near-daily *Dublin Evening Post*, the *Freeman's Journal*, and the *Belfast News-Letter*—were equally prominent in their own markets.³⁰ The *Freeman's Journal* and its chief commercial rival, the *Dublin Evening Post*, for example, are regarded as the most influential of the Irish newspapers of the 1780s. By 1781 the *Dublin Evening Post* claimed a circulation of four thousand, the largest of any newspaper in Ireland. Even the *Belfast News-Letter*, although a provincial newspaper, was one of the oldest and “most strongly based newspapers in Ireland.”³¹ Readership and circulation figures for specific eighteenth-century newspapers remain difficult to quantify, but given that most copies found their way to more than one reader, such numbers are not conclusive about a newspaper's reach. Moreover, because stories were printed and reprinted across newspapers with only little variation, it is unlikely that a larger sample would result in further variety in the coverage of the story or reveal substantial nuances.

Britain's triumph at the Saintes was certainly newsworthy to all these publications. A British victory had been rare in recent years; according to the memoirist Nathaniel Wraxall, reports from America had left the country “exhausted and humiliated.”³² Rodney himself was newsworthy too. Acknowledged as a talented naval man, Rodney was nonetheless a notorious and abrasive character who had tainted his reputation with “an aroma of corruption and personal

29. The *Morning Chronicle* was published from Monday to Saturday inclusive, while the *Morning Herald* appeared from Monday to Friday inclusive. The *British Gazette and Sunday Monitor* (hereafter cited as *Sunday Monitor*) was a weekly, the *London Gazette* usually appeared twice per week, and the *London Chronicle* was published three times weekly.

30. The *Dublin Evening Post* appeared from Monday to Saturday inclusive, the *Freeman's Journal* was published three times per week, and the *Belfast News-Letter* was published on Tuesday and Friday.

31. Inglis, *Freedom of the Press*, 22; Padhraig Higgins, “Bonfires, Illuminations, and Joy: Celebratory Street Politics and Uses of ‘the Nation’ during the Volunteer Movement,” *Éire-Ireland* 42:3&4 (Fall/Winter 2007): 177; Douglas Simes, “Ireland, 1760–1820s,” in *Press, Politics, and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820*, ed. Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 119.

32. Wheatley, ed., *Historical and Posthumous Memoirs*, 321.

dissipation.”³³ He had featured prominently in the press in 1781 because of his actions that year on St. Eustatius in the wake of the Dutch surrender of the island, prompting Edmund Burke to seek a parliamentary inquiry into Rodney’s conduct for over a year in a campaign that had the makings of his subsequent prosecution of Warren Hastings. Rodney, together with Major-General Sir John Vaughan, the commander of British land troops in the region, had remained at St. Eustatius for three months instead of continuing on to North America as the Admiralty expected him to do. On Rodney and Vaughan’s orders the British continued to fly the Dutch flag over the island in order to trap unsuspecting enemy ships, and they set to plundering the island and its inhabitants.³⁴ Departing from the norms of Caribbean warfare, the two men declared all private property within St. Eustatius to be forfeited prize goods, “essentially treating the entire island as if it were one vast captured ship.”³⁵ The residents of the island suffered. According to one account, “every necessary of life” was withheld for almost three weeks “before the retail shops were permitted to be opened.”³⁶ The fallout from the conduct of Rodney and Vaughan at St. Eustatius was negative and widespread. Rodney’s second-in-command, Sir Samuel Hood (1724–1816), predicted that the commanders would “find it difficult to convince the world that they [had] not proved themselves wickedly rapacious.”³⁷ A petition from the Society of West India Merchants and Planters was printed for public distribution, and satirical cartoons lampooned Rodney and Vaughan as vicious auctioneer and clerk.³⁸ In Amsterdam as many as forty thousand people rioted in protest against the plunder.³⁹

But events in the Caribbean were to overshadow the issues that arose at St. Eustatius. Given the practice of printing such correspondence

33. David Syrett, “Preface,” in *The Rodney Papers: Selections from the Correspondence of Admiral Lord Rodney, Vol. 1, 1742–1763*, ed. David Syrett (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), xi.

34. O’Shaughnessy, “Other Road,” 34, 37, 45, 49.

35. Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 431.

36. O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 217.

37. Quoted in O’Shaughnessy, “Other Road,” 41.

38. “The Late Auction at St. Eustatia” (London: E. Hedges, 11 June 1781; British Museum Image No. AN77864001).

39. O’Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 225.

in the *London Gazette* and beyond, Rodney would have been aware that his dispatches were more than private missives to the Admiralty and would be released for public consumption. According to Wraxall, in person “Rodney . . . talked perpetually of himself and was the hero of his own story.”⁴⁰ Rodney opened his first postbattle dispatch to the Admiralty with a characteristic flourish: “Sir, it has pleased God, out of His divine providence, to grant to His Majesty’s arms a most complete victory over the fleet of His enemy.”⁴¹ The method of distribution of the story of the *Saintes*—derived from the Admiral’s own account—enabled Rodney to cast himself as the hero in the press too. His dispatches after the *Saintes* were reproduced from Saturday’s *London Gazette* as a postscript in the *Sunday Monitor*, and as the lead stories on Monday in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Herald*.⁴² In Ireland the *Dublin Evening Post* broke the news of the *Saintes* three days after the news had arrived in London.⁴³ Two days later, both the *Dublin Evening Post* and the Dublin-based *Freeman’s Journal* printed Rodney’s dispatches in full.⁴⁴ The *Belfast News-Letter* was the only newspaper in this case study that did not reproduce Rodney’s dispatches in their entirety. Instead, the editor printed an extract of a letter from “a gentleman in Dublin to his friend in London” that referred to the *London Gazette* and explained the victory.⁴⁵ Subsequent correspondence from Rodney provided a steady stream of news, supplemented by letters from other officers in his fleet. The *London Chronicle* was the first to print two of Rodney’s private letters: the first to his agent Mr. Mailer and the second a letter to “a gentleman, a particular friend.”⁴⁶ Despite the fact that the letters contained little new information, they graced the cover of Thursday’s *London Chronicle*, demonstrating the ongoing newsworthiness of the victory.

In the initial stages of the news story official government sources thus dominated the reporting of the *Saintes*. Clearly unaware of the

40. Wheatley, ed., *Historical and Posthumous Memoirs*, 326.

41. *LG*, 14–18 May 1782.

42. *Sunday Monitor*, 19 May 1782; *MC*, 20 May 1782; *Morning Herald* (hereafter cited as *MH*), 20 May 1782.

43. *Dublin Evening Post* (hereafter cited as *DEP*), 21 May 1782.

44. *Ibid.*, 23 May 1782; *Freeman’s Journal* (hereafter cited as *FJ*), 21–23 May 1782.

45. *Belfast News-Letter* (hereafter cited as *BNL*), 21–24 May 1782.

46. *London Chronicle*, 18–21 May 1782.

recent change in government at Westminster from Lord North's administration to Rockingham's, Rodney wrote to his wife, "I hope the good people of England will now be pleased, and Opposition hide her head."⁴⁷ Against the backdrop of the St. Eustatius controversy and the associated litigation that had begun to accumulate against him, Rodney succeeded in utilizing the significant naval victory to transform his image in the English (and Irish) newspapers, putting himself beyond the reach of Burke, whose proposal to investigate was debated but ultimately defeated on the basis that numerous private court cases against Rodney had already been initiated.⁴⁸ In doing so, Rodney had successfully tapped into the tradition of the "admiral as hero" that had emerged over the course of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ His initial dispatches clearly acknowledged the role of his captains and officers in the victory, but there is no doubt that Rodney was aware of how the newspapers would portray the Saintes and his role as commander.

NEWS OF THE SAINTES IN LOCAL POLITICS

The initial reporting of the Saintes in the London, Dublin, and Belfast newspapers focused on the battle itself, and it was comprised of little more than reprints of Rodney's official dispatches. The coverage then moved to recounting the public celebrations of the victory around England and Ireland. Within days, however, the tone of the coverage in London and Ireland diverged as local news and politics began to infiltrate and influence the story. In London the news was soon dominated by the recall controversy: It emerged that the Admiralty, at the behest of the newly installed Rockingham government, had issued an order for Rodney's recall from his Caribbean post be-

47. Admiral Rodney to Lady Rodney, 20 April 1782, in Mundy, ed., *Life and Correspondence*, 2:263.

48. *Parliamentary Register*, vol. 5 (4 Dec. 1781): 82–97.

49. Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Trade, and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon," *Past & Present* 121 (Nov. 1988): 74–109; Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, "Admirals as Heroes: Patriotism and Liberty in Hanoverian England," *Journal of British Studies* 28:3 (July 1989): 201–24; Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 140–65; Conway, "Joy Unknown," 180–99.

fore news of the Saintes had reached Britain. In Ireland coverage of the Saintes was intertwined with news of Dublin's legislative independence from Westminster. By tracing the way in which news of the Saintes evolved differently in England and Ireland, it is possible to more fully appreciate the ebb and flow of contemporary opinion and to discern the varying impact of the imperial news.⁵⁰

London newspapers were obsessed with political intrigue, and it was only a matter of days before the first hint of controversy emerged in the coverage of the Saintes.⁵¹ Two days after news of the victory broke, the *Morning Herald* printed a letter addressed to the Earl of Sandwich signed by "an old crippled seaman of '58."⁵² The correspondent pleaded with Sandwich not to "let your admiral be forgotten though he is superceded in the command of the fleet," claiming that "his name will be revered by the sincere patriot, the honest citizen, and every individual who really wishes well to this mutilated, mangled, and ungoverned state."⁵³ This was the first of many letters printed in the London newspapers condemning Rodney's recall. Without the victory at the Saintes the recall would have barely registered as news. This aspect of the story soon dominated coverage of the Saintes in the London newspapers, highlighting the political nature of Admiralty appointees and the English politics of the moment.

The tone of the newspaper reports over the ensuing days indicated the strength of feeling among London editors and the newspaper-reading public. The content of London newspapers of the 1780s was overtly political, and political allegiance was expressed primarily by means of rudimentary editorial sections and letters from correspondents. Such items may not have been written by newspaper employees, but it is clear that those selected for publication reinforced the ideological stance and party-political allegiances expressed elsewhere

50. De Nie, "Speed the Mahdi," 886.

51. Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 43, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198207412.003.0003.

52. *MH*, 20 May 1782. The Earl of Sandwich had until recently commanded the Royal Navy, but one of the first actions of the Rockingham administration had been to remove him from the post and appoint Admiral Augustus Keppel as first lord of the Admiralty.

53. *Ibid.*

in the newspaper.⁵⁴ Editorial commentary too was strident on the matter of Rodney's recall. Even William Woodfall, the avowedly impartial editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, indicated his support for Sandwich, Rodney, and (by implication) the parliamentary opposition:

The public ought not, in the present moment of joy and happiness, to forget that the naval force of England was made superior to that of the French by the Earl of Sandwich, the good effects of which we now feel. . . . The brave Rodney, who had before taken a *Spanish* admiral and some of his ships, and has now taken a *French* admiral and totally defeated his fleet, was *actually recalled*, and Admiral Pigot, who has not been at sea for many years, appointed in his place.⁵⁵

Woodfall may have attempted to avoid partisan commentary in his *Morning Chronicle*, but the reports of proceedings in parliament could not hide the Rockingham administration's discomfort over the way in which its recall of Rodney had unraveled. In the House of Commons parliamentary opponents interrupted Secretary Charles James Fox's motion of thanks to Rodney, demanding to know who precisely had advised the recall and raising the prospect of a motion to address the king, "desiring him to countermand the recall."⁵⁶ The House was persuaded that such a motion was unnecessary and unwise; yet the damage had been done. Rodney's success in the Caribbean was embarrassing to the Rockingham administration and very welcome to its parliamentary opponents.⁵⁷ Indeed, Sandwich wrote privately to Rodney that "the administration will be so pelted in parliament and in the papers for having superseded you that they will be forced to revoke their measure."⁵⁸ This comment also hints at the link that parliamentarians perceived between newspapers, public opinion, and political action.

As the story of the *Saintes* in London descended into political intrigue, the newspapers in Dublin and Belfast intertwined news of the victory with that of the Irish parliament's freedom from Westminster

54. Barker, *Newspapers*, 43–44.

55. *MC*, 23 May 1782. See also Barker, *Newspapers*, 44

56. *Ibid.*

57. Conway, "Joy Unknown," 184.

58. Earl of Sandwich to Admiral Rodney, 26 May 1782, in Mundy, ed., *Life and Correspondence*, 2:307.

enabled by the repeal of the Declaratory Act. An apparent paradox emerged from the coverage of the Saintes in the *Dublin Evening Post*, *Freeman's Journal*, and *Belfast News-Letter*, all of which were well-established as patriotic, antigovernment newspapers.⁵⁹ All three enthusiastically applauded the imperial victory and the glory it afforded London while simultaneously celebrating Dublin's independence from Westminster. Indeed, news of the victory at the Saintes was hailed around Ireland with as much fervor as in England.⁶⁰ In Dublin and Belfast the news was greeted with illuminations, bell-ringing, bonfires, and firing of *feux de joie*. As in London, these initial celebrations must have been spontaneous. The Irish newspapers also reported illuminations in Dundalk, Larne, Rathfriland, and Philips-town.⁶¹ A correspondent from Dundalk observed that the news "that England has acceded to our demands" and that the French and the Dutch had been defeated precipitated the lighting of "the most stupendous bonfire. . . . So resplendent and conspicuous was the blaze that the very rocks appeared to be on fire."⁶²

It is notable that although the newspapers featured the Saintes more prominently—and ahead of—the news of contemporaneous British military successes in the East Indies (as was the case in the London papers), the Irish almost always mentioned the East Indies *along with* the Saintes in explaining the reason for celebrating. This contrasts with the coverage in London, which did not usually refer to East Indies news in relation to the public celebrations. This difference in emphasis may simply reflect the editors' judgment as to the newsworthiness of the dispatches from the East Indies among London readers. But it also underscores the political capital to be gained from accentuating Rodney's victory in the context of Westminster. As already noted, the London newspapers were—in the main—willing participants in this political project.

In addition to printing news based on Rodney's private correspondence, as the London newspapers had done, the Irish newspapers detailed the hospitality that Rodney had extended to de Grasse aboard

59. Inglis, *Freedom of the Press*, 22; Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 29; Simes, "Ireland, 1760–1820s," 119.

60. Conway, "Joy Unknown," 197.

61. *DEP*, 23, 25, 30 May 1782; *BNL*, 21–28 May 1782.

62. *DEP*, 25 May 1782.

HMS *Formidable*. This marks another point of difference from the London newspapers, which did not dwell upon this aspect of naval chivalry, perhaps preferring to emphasize the sense of Britain having diminished France rather than drawing attention to Rodney's egalitarian treatment of de Grasse. According to the *Dublin Evening Post's* correspondent, two days after the battle, Rodney and de Grasse dined on roast venison, hams, soups, *pullets a royale* (*sic*), duck, fish, and hunting puddings. De Grasse also "drank freely of bottled porter, a liquor which he said he was very fond of, and of which he had several bottles on board the *Ville de Paris* when she was captured."⁶³ The English pleasure at defeating the French cannot be underestimated. As Conway has argued, France was the "defining counterpoint that gave meaning to national identity."⁶⁴ The different emphases between the English and Irish coverage suggest that the anti-Gallic aspect of the imperial news was less relevant in Ireland.

As already noted, one reason for the exuberance of the Irish celebrations (and newspaper reports) was that the press could announce news of Ireland's legislative independence from Westminster within days of the news of the *Saintes* and, in some cases, in the same issue of the newspaper. Whereas the English press was preoccupied with the recall, the Irish newspapers were focused on the repeal of the act. On 17 May (the day before news of the *Saintes* arrived in England), both houses of parliament at Westminster passed a series of key measures that ensured that Ireland would no longer be automatically bound to abide by Britain's laws.⁶⁵ The *Freeman's Journal* combined the "glorious" news of the vote that restored Ireland "to liberty" with the recent imperial military victories. The *Dublin Evening Post* printed an extract from a letter from provincial Ireland stating that "nothing could exceed the joy" of the townspeople upon hearing of the "gallant Rodney," the capture of Ceylon, and "that which Irishmen prize above all, their emancipation from a foreign legislation."⁶⁶ Moreover, the tone of the reporting of celebrations in the Irish newspapers was markedly different from that of the London newspapers. When compared

63. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1782.

64. Conway, "Joy Unknown," 192.

65. Mark Pack, "Charles James Fox, the Repeal of Poyning's Law, and the Act of Union, 1782–1801," *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 33 (Winter 2001): 6–8.

66. *DEP*, 21 May 1782.

with the reports of the celebrations of the Saintes in the Irish press, the English reports appear staid and matter-of-fact. The language employed by the London papers was far less emotive than that in Ireland. Particularly evocative were reports of the burning of effigies of Lord Loughborough, the only dissenting voice in the Westminster vote on Ireland's legislative independence. According to the *Belfast News-Letter*, the Carrickfergus Volunteers, in a similar fashion to others around Ireland, assembled on parade to celebrate, "then marched thro' the town and its environs" carrying an effigy of Loughborough "clad in the gown of a Scotch advocate, a highlander's bonnet and horse, riding on a Scotch mule." The effigy was hanged, drawn, and quartered before being cut down and burned.⁶⁷

In considering what the newspaper reports on the Saintes can reveal about local imperial sensibilities in Ireland, it is important to acknowledge the mediating role of the press. In his study of Irish celebratory street politics in 1779, Padhraig Higgins noted that few sources exist that can illuminate individual participants' perceptions of festivities, but that those contemporaries who did reflect upon these forms of collective action "leave little doubt that they believed them to be emotionally charged and 'historic' moments." A prominent source of such reflections on public celebrations was the newspaper press. Newspapers routinely reported the wide variety of rituals and public festivities that comprised Ireland's "rich commemorative and celebratory calendar."⁶⁸ In analyzing the reports of these rituals, Higgins drew upon the work of David Waldstreicher, who argued that historians must pay attention to the printed discourse that "surrounded these events and gave them extralocal meaning." That is, newspaper reports did more than simply describe events; they also "transformed and nationalised scores of local rituals."⁶⁹

Higgins argued that the Irish press in the 1770s and 1780s promoted a highly mediated understanding of the political community and the national interest not only by virtue of explicit political argument but also, more subtly, in the everyday reporting of the spectacular politics of the Volunteers on the street and the parade ground.⁷⁰ The contents

67. *BNL*, 24–28 May 1782.

68. Higgins, "Bonfires," 176.

69. *Ibid.*, 177–78.

70. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 55.

of the Irish newspapers in this case study certainly exhibited both explicit political commentary as well as voluminous reporting on the Volunteers in particular, who played an active role in promoting local celebrations of the Saintes. According to Higgins, the rise of the Volunteer movement in the late 1770s “multiplied opportunities for participating in popular festivities” throughout Ireland.⁷¹ The columns of the *Dublin Evening Post*, *Freeman’s Journal*, and *Belfast News-Letter* brimmed with detailed reports of the Volunteer companies and their resolutions, thus presenting a relatively militarized image of the Irish celebrations of the Saintes in comparison with their London counterparts. For example, the *Dublin Evening Post* managed to combine commentary on the illuminations celebrating the military victories in the Caribbean and Ceylon with a report on the “armed thousands” of Volunteers who “poured from the Exchange in numbers that almost exceeded belief”: “Nothing could exceed the brilliancy of the spectacles while the troops lined the walks of the Green, which was heightened to a most amazing degree of splendour by the general illumination of every house from the ground story to the roof of the most elegant and extensive square in Europe. Everything displayed a perfect blaze of joy.”⁷²

Despite these differences, such divergences based on local conditions should not be taken too far. It is notable too that in addition to reporting the celebrations in the larger cities, the English and Irish newspapers printed many letters from correspondents reporting on the celebrations in provincial centers. The repetition of the ritualistic celebrations enhanced the persuasive power of these reports and emphasized their widespread nature. While the provincial celebrations may have been spatially separate, the repetitive reports evoked a commonality of purpose and sentiment in England and Ireland. Moreover, assertions as to the strength of the mediating influence of the press must be balanced against the views of historians who have argued convincingly that although newspapers were highly political, they were above all business concerns. Consequently, they were more dependent upon their appeal to a wide readership base than they were upon political patronage.⁷³ As Troy Bickham has argued,

71. Ibid.

72. *DEP*, 23 May 1782.

73. Barker, *Newspapers*, 4.

the press may once have been accepted as “party bugles operated by corrupt editors in search of bribes or satisfying personal vendettas,” but scholars now acknowledge that eighteenth-century newspapers were profitable businesses backed by advertising revenues, not party funds.⁷⁴ The pressure to maintain extensive distributions ensured that newspapers were highly dependent upon their appeal to readers. Newspaper politics appear to have been shaped less by politicians than by a desire on the part of editors to engage with public opinion.⁷⁵ This is especially important to remember with regard to the Irish press, which was relatively free of political interference in the early 1780s. Prior to 1784 anybody could publish without special license or submission of the manuscript for censorship.⁷⁶ Although the political persuasions of the Irish newspapers—as with those in London—were almost always transparently obvious, these newspapers were also commercial concerns. They could not have attracted essential advertising revenue unless their editors engaged with public opinion and maintained circulation numbers.

THE IRISH CASE

The impact of imperial news was shaped and oriented by the specifics of local politics and in the case of Ireland by the ambivalent relation of politics to the metropole. The initial similarities in the reporting between London and Ireland reflect the network and sources upon which the news was based, but as the story developed, local context and politics increasingly impinged upon the way in which the news was presented. Conway has argued that the Irish enthusiasm for the victory at the Saintes signified a desire in Ireland (at least among the Protestant community) to be not only proudly Irish but also proudly British.⁷⁷ I propose a subtly different interpretation that arises from examining the information networks at play in the transmission of the news of the Saintes, from assessing the mediating role of the press, and from drawing upon the recent historiography of patriotism in eighteenth-century Ireland: I wish to argue that the paradox does not signify a desire to be

74. Bickham, *Making Headlines*, 9.

75. Barker, *Newspapers*, 4.

76. Inglis, *Freedom of the Press*, 15.

77. Conway, “Joy Unknown,” 197.

British *per se*, but rather a desire to share in “English” liberties and to be considered an equal partner in the project of empire.⁷⁸

Most of the Irish coverage of the events of April and May 1782 was combined, suggesting that celebrations of independence and imperial military victories went hand-in-hand. Mathew Carey, the editor of the *Freeman’s Journal*, however, was at pains to point out that the celebrations on 22 May in Dublin related *only* to the Saintes, and that the advent of independence necessitated separate celebrations.⁷⁹ He argued that the celebrations of Rodney’s victory demonstrated that the Irish were “equally interested with the sister kingdom, whose concerns are now become our own,” to celebrate “the fate of their common parent.”⁸⁰ Subsequent celebrations would be held once “the last act of the king and parliament of Great Britain shall, in an explicit, authentic, and irrevocable manner,” acknowledge the rights of Ireland.⁸¹ Carey described the celebrations of the Saintes as the result of an event

in which as an obliged people we should esteem ourselves equally interested with the sister kingdom, whose concerns are now become our own in consequence of the liberal, just, and affectionate tie which will *soon unite* both nations in an indissoluble union, not founded on force or necessity but on the spontaneous goodwill of sisters equally happy in the fate of their COMMON PARENT.⁸²

It is references to “sister kingdom” and “common parent” that suggest an aspiration to be considered as an equal partner in empire.⁸³ This is the key to unraveling the apparent paradox of the enthusiastic

78. Kidd, “North Britishness,” 362.

79. *FJ*, 23–25 May 1782; Johanna Archbold and Sylvie Kleinman, “Carey, Mathew (1760–1839),” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 339–42.

80. *FJ*, 23–25 May 1782.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*

83. This sentiment echoes the early eighteenth-century “nationalism of Irish Protestants” identified by Thomas Bartlett, and the “striking” frequency with which pro-unionists mentioned the empire during the debates over union in the British and Irish parliaments in 1799–1800. See Thomas Bartlett, “‘This Famous Island Set in a Virginian Sea’: Ireland in the British Empire, 1690–1801,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume II: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23–24.

celebration of the Saintes against a background of ongoing agitation for constitutional independence from Westminster.

Carey's editorial highlights the complexities of the celebrations of the Saintes. As already noted, the Volunteers played a prominent role in the celebrations. In one sense the fact that the Volunteers, a predominantly Protestant militia, celebrated an imperial victory is not unexpected. But this interpretation overlooks the intricacies of late eighteenth-century Irish patriotism, arguably viewing religious and political differences through the lens of the nineteenth century when nationalism and loyalism occupied opposite ends of a spectrum of patriotism. In fact, by 1782 the Volunteers encompassed not only Protestant men from all social classes but also many Catholics.⁸⁴ The Volunteers had overcome the localism of their origins and created a regional and national structure that enabled them to operate as a powerful political force in their own right.⁸⁵ Between 1781 and 1782 they were involved in the campaign for legislative independence. The fact that a militaristic organization that supported devolution from Westminster so enthusiastically celebrated an imperial victory requires further analysis.

The revision over the past decade in the historiography of Irish patriotism and political culture in the eighteenth century helps to explain the stance adopted by the *Freeman's Journal*. Conway addressed the question with reference to Colin Kidd's exposition of Scottish patriotism in the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ Recent scholarship has built upon this, with a specific focus on patriotism in Ireland in the 1780s and the meaning attached to the term "patriot" by eighteenth-century Irish men and women. Somewhat confusingly for the modern reader, patriot was a term adopted by proponents of a range of political positions; opponents of the government attempted to monopolize the term, but supporters also identified themselves as patriots. By placing patriotism in its eighteenth-century Irish, British, and European contexts, scholars have dispatched the notion that Irish patrio-

84. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 129; Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760–1783* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 312.

85. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 129.

86. Conway, "Joy Unknown," 182; Colin Kidd, "North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms," *Historical Journal* 39:2 (June 1996): 361–82.

tism in the period was simply a form of “protonationalism, part of the story of an unfolding Irish national identity.”⁸⁷ Instead, patriotism has come to be associated with what Colin Kidd has described as “the rights of Englishmen.”⁸⁸ Higgins’s assessment of Irish patriotism in the prenationalist era aligns with Kidd’s exposition of patriotism in the Scottish context in the years preceding union with England—an approach that has been instructive for scholars of Irish patriotism. Kidd argued that patriotism in that period had not yet acquired a predominantly ethnocentric meaning; rather, it was “associated with ideals and practices which held universal appeal.” Contemporaries connected notions of liberty and individual rights to the English ideal of self-government that in the “British world . . . came to be equated with winning or preserving the rights of Englishmen.”⁸⁹ Indeed, adherence to an Anglo-British form of patriotism was a common feature of political discourse in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world.⁹⁰

Exploring these concepts in the Irish context, scholars have expanded on Kidd’s original findings. Stephen Small identified patriotism’s connection with liberty and the moral and intellectual qualities that fostered it. Joep Leerssen ascribed to this conception of patriotism a combination of social responsibility and “selfless devotion to the common weal,” which could incorporate economic and social improvement and the defense of constitutional rights against oligarchy and arbitrary rule.⁹¹ Patriotism was often associated in the British tradition with a Whig defense of parliamentary rights against the crown and with opposition to arbitrary power, as well as with a more general love of one’s country. Leerssen noted, however, that over the course of the eighteenth century patriotism began to lose its Whigish overtones and became associated with disenchantment with a

87. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 19–27.

88. Kidd, “North Britishness,” 362.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, 361–82.

91. Stephen Small, “The Twisted Roots of Irish Patriotism: Anglo-Irish Political Thought in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Éire-Ireland* 35:3&4 (2000–2001): 187–216; Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996), 10. Both quoted in Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 20.

political system based on vested interests. In relation to Scotland Kidd noted that “there was apparently nothing unpatriotic about replicating English institutions.” Scholars of patriotism in Ireland have detected a similar desire to share in the same freedoms and institutions of self-government as those enjoyed by metropolitan Englishmen (within certain limits). Although it is accepted that a British element “pervaded political life” in Ireland and rendered patriotism in the period Anglocentric, Higgins argued (as did Kidd) that patriotism was also prone to exhibiting an anti-English aspect in the face of specific constitutional and economic grievances. Kidd’s caution that patriotism should not be considered immutable is pertinent. In the Scottish context he argued that “the forces of attraction and repulsion” along the axis of English and Scottish identification were not constant in the various constitutive elements of national identity, and therefore that they changed over time.⁹²

This marks a significant shift in interpretation. As already noted, earlier scholarship drew very much upon a nationalist (or proto-nationalist) conception of eighteenth-century patriotism.⁹³ The behavior of patriots or political activists in the eighteenth century was viewed through this prism of nationalism. But as Higgins concluded, Irish patriotism during the 1780s was not necessarily attached to a desire to devolve from Britain, but rather sought above all to defend “individual rights and liberty against the arbitrary encroachments of government” and to promote “the public good.”⁹⁴ Within this frame of reference it is entirely possible to conceive of public celebration of an imperial victory because to do so did not detract from the aim of Irish equality with England. In the words of the *Freeman’s Journal*, the celebrations denoted happiness in the “fate of their common parent.”⁹⁵

It is therefore indicative that certain newspapers like the *Dublin Evening Post* did not differentiate between celebrations of imperial

92. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 19–20; Kidd, “North Britishness,” 361–62, 370, 380.

93. For example, see James Kelly, *Prelude to Union: Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1992); Ian McBride, “‘The Common Name of Irishman’: Protestantism and Patriotism in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,” in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850*, ed. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 236–61.

94. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 20.

95. *F7*, 23–25 May 1782.

military victories in the West and East Indies on the one hand and the advent of legislative independence on the other. Furthermore, the letters from correspondents around Ireland that appeared in the pages of the *Dublin Evening Post* and the *Belfast News-Letter* over the following days all attributed their celebrations equally to the three events.⁹⁶ Reports in the *Belfast News-Letter* did suggest that the first celebrations by the Carrickfergus Volunteers in Belfast were in response solely to Rodney's victory, as no mention was made of legislative independence in the report of the celebrations even though news of the Westminster vote appeared in the same issue of the newspaper. The report of the initial celebrations stated simply that "in consequence of the news of Admiral Rodney's victory in the West Indies, the Belfast Troop and Belfast Artillery paraded and fired a feu de joys (*sic*)—and the evening concluded with illuminations, bonfires, etc."⁹⁷ In the following issue, however, the editor described the celebrations that had occurred over the previous weekend as being on account of "our glorious emancipation from slavery, as also our conquests in the West Indies."⁹⁸

Although the *Freeman's Journal* employed the most florid language of the three Irish newspapers under review, the *Dublin Evening Post* and *Belfast News-Letter* also reported legislative independence with great excitement. On 23 May the *Dublin Evening Post* described the parade of Volunteers in the city to "testify their satisfaction" with the vote for legislative independence "of this long injured country."⁹⁹ The report went on to state that Rodney's victory in the West Indies and the capture of Ceylon in the East "gave the most heartfelt pleasure to every Irishman who wishes to live only to share the liberty and share the fate of Britain."¹⁰⁰ In this short phrase the editor encapsulated what Irish patriots sought from the empire—liberty and a commonality of purpose. In a subtler way the *Dublin Evening Post* thus advanced the same opinion as the *Freeman's Journal*. In reporting the vote for legislative independence, the *Belfast News-Letter* proclaimed Ireland's "glorious emancipation from slavery" and described how

96. *DEP*, 23, 25, 30 May 1782; *BNL*, 24–28 May 1782.

97. *Ibid.*, 21–24 May 1782.

98. *BNL*, 24–28 May 1782.

99. *DEP*, 23 May 1782.

100. *Ibid.*

“loyal inhabitants” in the provinces had demonstrated “their heartfelt pleasure” at “that which every Irishman prizes above all, emancipation from a foreign legislature,” together with the military victories in the West and East Indies.¹⁰¹ Reports such as these indicate that to celebrate both the imperial news and the advent of legislative independence was considered an act of loyalty to Ireland—at least by the newspapers under review.

It is important to note that although the newspaper issues examined in this case study did not display explicitly anti-Catholic sentiments, all three reflected Protestant interests.¹⁰² The degree to which Catholic Ireland embraced the Protestant patriot vision within the context of the empire is a question for a different study, but some examination of Catholic engagement with the newspapers in this study is necessary. The absence of newspapers printed exclusively for the Catholic majority during the eighteenth century does not mean that the newspapers in this study did not reach Catholic readers. Niall Ó Ciosáin has discounted previous assertions that the “Catholic masses” could not access metropolitan newspapers on account of literacy or language barriers. While noting that in the late eighteenth century Ireland was “an intensely bilingual and diglossic society,” Ó Ciosáin has argued that during this period Ireland underwent “one of the most rapid and total language shifts in modern European history” as greater proportions of the population began to utilize English—the language of the elite, law, and print.¹⁰³ Despite the fact that newspapers in eighteenth-century Ireland still appealed primarily to English-speaking Protestants, the culture of print was more inclusive than has often been assumed.¹⁰⁴

This essay about the reporting of the *Saintes* demonstrates that in addition to newspaper accounts about local politics and patriotic activities, imperial information was abundant and prominent in the Irish newspapers. As Michael de Nie and Jennifer Regan have

101. *BNL*, 24–28 May 1782.

102. Mary Pollard, *Dublin's Trade in Books, 1550–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 24; Morley, *Irish Opinion*, 279; Simes, “Ireland, 1760–1820s,” 119; Inglis, *Freedom of the Press*, 22.

103. Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland, 1750–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), 6.

104. Simes, “Ireland, 1760–1820s,” 115; Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 30.

both acknowledged in their examinations of popular views of empire in nineteenth-century Ireland, newspapers cannot reveal what people thought, “but they should reveal what kind of information was available to the literate public who did not have imperial knowledge through first-hand accounts.”¹⁰⁵ By tracing the interaction between news of legislative independence and the victory at the Saintes in a selection of newspapers, it has been possible to uncover a particular strain of patriotism that aligns with recent historiography on late eighteenth-century Ireland. In May 1782 patriotic editors and correspondents hinted at the possibility of a new equality between Ireland and Britain. Rather than celebrating their inherent Britishness, the newspapers heralded a new commercial and constitutional equality between Ireland and England in which the people of Ireland could share in the rights that flowed from English institutions as well as take pleasure in the victories of the British empire.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

Close analysis of Rodney’s victory at the Saintes provides insight into a brief period in May 1782 when newspaper readers in London, Dublin, and Belfast could read about—and celebrate—a comprehensive victory over Britain’s traditional foe, France. The interaction between the imperial news of the Saintes, legislative independence in Ireland, and the machinations of party politics at Westminster serves to emphasize the intricate relationship between the press, politics, and public opinion in the eighteenth century. In London the reversal in Rodney’s reputation as portrayed in the press had potent political impact, not least for Edmund Burke. Burke made a final attempt in February 1782 to initiate an investigation into Rodney’s conduct at St. Eustatius.¹⁰⁷ Three months later, the vehemence with which the recall controversy was reported in the London newspapers rendered any investigation into St. Eustatius a political impossibility despite Burke’s move by then to the government benches.

105. Jennifer M. Regan, “‘We Could Be of Service to Other Suffering People’: Representations of India in the Irish Nationalist Press, c. 1857–1887,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 41:1 (Spring 2008): 62–63.

106. Kelly, *Prelude to Union*, ix.

107. O’Shaughnessy, “Other Road,” 44–46.

In Ireland the combination of the imperial news with the repeal of the Declaratory Act resulted in complicated public celebrations. Reporting on both events permitted patriotic newspaper editors and correspondents to hint at the possibility of a new equality between Dublin and Westminster. Rather than celebrating their inherent Britishness, the newspapers heralded a new commercial and constitutional equality between Ireland and England, which (it was hoped) would grant the people of Ireland access to the “rights of Englishmen.”¹⁰⁸ In return Ireland would share in the benefits of the empire. As it turned out, legislative independence was a short-lived affair. The Rockingham administration, which had supported Irish legislative independence, came to an end in July 1782, and with it so too did the unrealistic aspirations of the Irish parliament. Successive British governments endeavored to mitigate the impact of free trade and legislative independence by concluding a “final adjustment” of Anglo-Irish relations. This final adjustment entailed tighter control from Westminster, undermining the gains achieved for Ireland in 1782.¹⁰⁹

Ireland may have been marked out as anomalous by some scholars of empire, but this essay has borne out the assertions of Michael de Nie, among others, that the study of Ireland can benefit considerably from the methodologies of the new imperial history.¹¹⁰ The newspaper reporting and the celebration of the Saintes in Dublin and Belfast have shown that Ireland’s engagement with the empire in the early 1780s was more complex than simply a story of protonationalism.¹¹¹ Although limited in scale, this case study has uncovered a specifically Irish sensibility about empire that manifested itself as a desire to participate as an equal partner in the imperial project. The notion of patriotism was central to this articulation of empire. Scholars such as Higgins, Morley, and Ó Ciosáin have argued that Irish patriotism was more inclusive than previously accepted, and that it did not necessarily divide neatly along sectarian lines. On this basis the imperial

108. Kelly, *Prelude to Union*, ix; Kidd, “North Britishness,” 362.

109. Kelly, *Prelude to Union*, ix.

110. De Nie, “Speed the Mahdi,” 885; Stephen Howe, “Minding the Gaps: New Directions in the Study of Ireland and Empire,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37:1 (March 2009): 136; Joe Cleary, “Amongst Empires: A Short History of Ireland and Empire Studies in International Context,” *Éire-Ireland* 42:1&2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 11–57.

111. Higgins, *Nation of Politicians*, 19.

sensibilities identified in this article represent more than simply a Protestant attitude toward empire. Taken at face value, the vibrant newspaper reporting of the *Saintes* and the exuberance of the public celebrations around England and Ireland constitute an example of the type of popular imperialism common in the eighteenth century. It has been possible, however, to write politics into this history of popular imperialism by means of a detailed investigation of the way in which the news of the *Saintes* unfolded. For the period under review empire was an integral element in domestic English and Irish politics and patriotism. Just as the early works of the new imperial history teased out English imperial sensibilities, this case study has demonstrated the value of the new imperial history in doing the same for Ireland. A painstaking review of the reporting of a single imperial episode has disclosed both a specifically Irish sensibility about imperialism and an expanded role for empire in the domestic history of Ireland in the period before nationalism came to dominate the Anglo-Irish relationship.