

Other voices: The Bell and documentary journalism

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The Bell believes that the first thing we must do in Ireland is to see clearly – *voir clair* – to have the facts and understand the picture. This has never been attempted before ... there are plenty other magazines that deal with abstractions. There should be room for one that is content to concern itself with facts ... Every time Life walks into this magazine it must stir up argument. That kind of argument is good – that kind *The Bell* will always awaken.¹

As one of the foremost periodicals of the 1940s, *The Bell* has been assessed in terms of its contribution to literature and literary criticism, its advocacy of a broad and inclusive definition of Irish identity, its anti-censorship stance and its social policy objectives.² Its significant contribution to the development of journalism in Ireland has not, however, been assessed. This chapter rectifies this deficit by arguing that *The Bell* represented a dramatic intervention in the journalism of mid-twentieth century Ireland. By pioneering documentary journalism and by encouraging citizen journalism, *The Bell* blazed a trail that was revealing and revolutionary. And while *The Bell* ceased publication in 1954, its influence lived on – most particularly in the documentary journalism initiated by the *Irish Times* from the early 1960s onwards.

It is fitting that the *Irish Times* was the inheritor of this tradition as it was the *Times* that *The Bell* had most in common with in the media market of the period. Unlike the *Irish Independent* or the *Irish Press*, both the *Irish Times* and *The Bell* expressed strong reservations with the type of society that had emerged since independence. Although both publications approached current affairs from different perspectives – the *Times* from a southern unionist perspective and *The Bell* from a lapsed-nationalist perspective – they sang from the same hymn-sheet in terms of criticising the power of the Irish language movement, opposing literary censorship, and articulating the need for society to acknowledge and deal with the conditions under which people lived rather than invoke religious or nationalist

¹ 'Answer to a criticism', *Bell*, 1:3 (Dec. 1940), 5–6 at 6.

² See K. Matthews, *The Bell magazine and the representation of Irish identity* (Dublin, 2012); B. Fanning, *The quest for modern Ireland: the battle of ideas 1912–86* (Dublin, 2008); F. Shovlin, *The Irish literary periodical 1923–58* (Oxford, 2003); M. Adams, *Censorship: the Irish experience* (Alabama, 1968); B. Kirwan, 'The social policy of *The Bell*', *Administration*, 37:2 (1989), 99–118.

pieties as a substitute for the realities of daily life.³ This emphasis on the actuality of lived experience rather than abstract realities often exposed the harsh side of Irish life that was far removed from the imagined ends of independence. It was also far removed from the image of Irish society portrayed by the national press, which, with the exception of the *Irish Times*, shied away from subjects viewed as taboo or above critical analysis.

The post-independence media landscape

In one of the few self-critical reflections on journalism in early to mid-twentieth century Ireland, journalist Michael O'Toole observed that up to the 1960s journalists were generally 'a docile lot, anxious to please the proprietor, the advertiser, the prelate, the statesman'. The era was, he argued, characterised by 'an unhealthy willingness to accept the prepared statement, the prepared speech, and the handout without demanding the opportunity of asking any searching questions by way of follow-up'.⁴ The fundamental defect of Irish journalism during this time was, he noted, 'its failure to apply critical analysis to practically any aspect of Irish life'.⁵ The historian Terence Brown was harsher in his summation of journalism in pre-1960s Ireland: he noted that 'almost all Irish journalism in the period had contented itself with the reportage of events and the propagandist reiteration of the familiar terms of Irish political and cultural debate until these categories became mere counters and slogans often remote from any actualities'.⁶

Post-independence, many national newspaper titles were effectively the organs or semi-organs of the dominant institutions within the state. Fianna Fáil had the uncritical support of the *Irish Press* and throughout the 1930s and 1940s the paper's support for the party's policies – economic protectionism, restoration of the Irish language and neutrality – was unshakable.⁷ On the other side of the political spectrum, Fine Gael was supported by the *Irish Independent* which also traded on strong support for the Catholic church. The worldview of the Catholic church was represented by the *Irish Catholic* and *The Standard*. But while there was plenty of competition for voters and readers, there was little space for diversity of opinion. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael may have adopted different positions on political, economic or social issues and these positions may have been supported respectively

³ For a history of the *Irish Times*, see M. O'Brien, *The Irish Times: a history* (Dublin, 2008).

⁴ M. O'Toole, 'The Roman Catholic church and the media in Ireland' in T. Fahy & M. Kelly (eds) *The role of the media in Irish society* (Dublin, 1988), pp 11–14 at 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁶ T. Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history* (Dublin, 2004), pp 192–3.

⁷ For a history of the *Irish Press*, see M. O'Brien, *De Valera, Fianna Fáil and the Irish Press: the truth in the news?* (Dublin, 2001) and R. Burke, *Press Delete* (Dublin, 2005).

by the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Independent*, but, in the heel of the hunt, such positions first passed through the filters of nationalist and religious ideology. Very little that challenged the dominant narrative that Ireland was a unique monoculture characterised by religious virtue and Gaelic ideals of ruralism and language restoration was published in mainstream newspapers.

Reviewing this situation in 1935, the novelist Frank O'Connor declared that Irish daily newspapers were 'intolerably dull', were 'not trying to educate the public', and were 'trying to camouflage reality.' Replying to O'Connor, then editor of the *Irish Times*, R.M. Smyllie, presciently noted that it was 'only in the last dozen years or so that the Press in Ireland had a chance to develop an independent national outlook' and that it would 'take another ten or fifteen years before they could get rid of their party complexes and develop along normal national lines'.⁸ Reflecting the viewpoint of the Protestant minority – and once described by an opponent as giving publicity to 'all kinds of cranks and scoffers, sabbatarians, secularists, [and] grouching intellectuals' – the *Times* was the only national newspaper to challenge the shape that Irish society was taking post-independence by editorialising against the compulsory teaching of Irish, the prohibition of divorce, and literary censorship.⁹ It was into this somewhat stultifying media environment that *The Bell* first appeared in October 1940.

The origins of *The Bell*

In a letter to the *Irish Times* in 1970, Sean O'Faolain stated that *The Bell* 'was, from start to finish, Peadar O'Donnell's creation, and as it was his inspiration, neither could it have gone on appearing without his tireless guidance and most inventive support'.¹⁰ In response, while O'Donnell stated that *The Bell* was 'O'Faolain's creation', he acknowledged that the idea for the magazine was his.¹¹ Given the backgrounds of both men, the ethos espoused by *The Bell* was not what one might have expected. O'Faolain had served as secretary of the Cork branch of the Gaelic League and had joined the Irish Volunteers during the war of independence. He took the anti-Treaty side in 1921, spent much of the civil war as a bomb maker and propagandist, and in the early 1920s served as editor of Sinn Féin's eponymous newspaper. Having turned to literature, his first collection of short stories, *Midsummer Night Madness*, was banned by the censorship board, which deemed it indecent, in 1932. By this time,

⁸ *Irish Times*, 15 June 1935.

⁹ *The Standard*, 28 Feb. 1958.

¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 25 Feb. 1970.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1970.

O'Faolain had 'swung away from republicanism and towards a suspicion of calcified nationalism which he felt characterised post-revolutionary Ireland'.¹² By 1935 he had decided to establish a magazine 'or burst': he envisaged 'something fairly astringent'.¹³ However, his plans were pre-empted in 1936 by the appearance of *Ireland To-day*, which described itself as a 'lay monthly magazine [that deals] with social, economic, national and cultural matters ... with a strong literary intrusion of story, poems, and a much-appreciated book section'.¹⁴

Having trained as a teacher, O'Donnell left the profession to become a regional organiser with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. During the war of independence he devoted himself fulltime to IRA activities, took the anti-Treaty side during the civil war and was imprisoned early in the conflict. In 1926 he became editor of *An Phoblacht* and in 1934 was central to unsuccessful attempts to bring republicans, socialists and trade unionists together in a Republican Congress. The idea of establishing a broad-ranging journal had been with him since his prison days and the decline of *Ireland To-day* in 1938 presented him with an opportunity to act. Through an intermediary he brought his idea to Joe McGrath, a former government minister who had established the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes. McGrath invested £1,000 and, as O'Donnell later recalled, without this help *The Bell* would 'have remained an idea'.¹⁵ His next step was to secure an editor and one day in mid-summer 1940, he strode purposefully up to O'Faolain in a Dublin street 'like a policeman', and asked him to edit the new journal he was establishing.¹⁶

While O'Faolain was the editorial driving force of *The Bell*, it was O'Donnell who, as business manager, used his extensive contacts to secure advertising to keep the magazine going. Cost containment was always a factor – represented most prominently in the quality of the paper on which *The Bell* was printed. Many years later, O'Faolain recalled that 'some Dublin wag said truly that it was a most distinguished production if for no reason than that it was the only magazine in the world printed on lavatory paper with ink made of soot'.¹⁷ Published as a monthly magazine, it first appeared in October 1940 and its first issue of 5,000

¹² Shovlin, *Irish literary periodical*, p. 105.

¹³ O'Faolain diary, cited in M. Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain* (London, 1994), p. 291. For O'Faolain's obituary, see *Irish Times*, 22 Apr. 1991.

¹⁴ *Ireland To-day*, 2:1 (Jan. 1937), 3–4. For an account of the establishment of *Ireland To-day* by its founder, James O'Donovan, see *Irish Times*, 23 May 1968.

¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 4 Mar. 1970. For a detailed interview of O'Donnell, see *Irish Times*, 22 Feb. 1983. For more on McGrath, see J. McGuire & J. Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish biography* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁶ P. Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Dublin, 1999), p. 241, cited in L. White, 'Peadar O'Donnell, real republicanism and *The Bell*', *Culture in the republic*, 4 (2005), 80–99 at 81.

¹⁷ S. O'Faolain, *Vive Moi!* (ed. J. O'Faolain, London, 1993), p. 315

copies sold out in Dublin on its first day of publication.¹⁸ By July 1941 the print run had increased to 5,500 copies per issue.¹⁹ However, a price increase, stemming from increased costs and contracting advertising, in December 1941 resulted in a circulation fall of 25 per cent.²⁰ To O’Faolain’s mind, however, if there was a positive to low circulation, it was that *The Bell* had ‘an intelligent, selective readership’ and could ‘assume a great deal of personal liberty of expression’.²¹ That select readership was described by Conor Cruise O’Brien as ‘teachers, librarians, junior civil servants, the lettered section of the Irish petty bourgeoisie’ – effectively those who held whatever level of power there was to hold in local communities.²² And it was clear that this readership wanted: the results of a readers’ survey carried out in May 1945 indicated that ‘the general *Bell* public do not want a literary magazine.’²³

Editorially, *The Bell* was infused with the searing frustration that O’Faolain and O’Donnell felt at the conservatism – or counter-revolution – that had followed Irish independence. This frustration was amplified by the fact that both men had, in earlier times, viewed Eamon de Valera as the saviour of all things republican. In 1933 O’Faolain had written a glowing biographical account of de Valera’s career up to the civil war.²⁴ However, de Valera’s performance in government from 1932 onwards, particularly the economic war with Britain and the conservative nature of the 1937 Constitution, resulted in a more critical biography – that portrayed de Valera as a negative influence on Irish life – published by O’Faolain in 1939.²⁵ Similarly, as editor of *An Phoblacht*, O’Donnell had called on republicans to vote for Fianna Fáil in the 1932 general election.²⁶ But with limited land reform and redistribution following the party’s success, O’Donnell too lost faith with de Valera. While O’Faolain and O’Donnell had hoped that an independent Ireland would be a state based on liberty, fraternity and equality, what emerged, post-independence, was, in the words of Donal McCartney, ‘a nationalism that was exclusive, isolationist, restrictive, narrow and bourgeois in its values’.²⁷ This was not the Ireland that O’Faolain had envisaged while engaged in militant activity: ‘We had looked forward to seeing all classes untied, all religions

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 16 Nov. 1940.

¹⁹ ‘Memo for businessmen’, *Bell*, 2:4 (July 1941), 54.

²⁰ ‘Third Year’, *Bell*, 5:1 (Oct. 1942), 2.

²¹ ‘On editing a magazine’, *Bell*, 9:2 (Nov. 1944), 93–101 at 95–6.

²² ‘Horizon’, *Bell*, 11:6 (Mar. 1946), 1030.

²³ ‘Verdict on *The Bell* 2’, *Bell*, 10:5 (Aug. 1945), 435.

²⁴ S. O’Faolain, *The life story of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin, 1933).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *De Valera* (Penguin, 1939).

²⁶ White, ‘Peader O’Donnell’, 82.

²⁷ D. McCartney, ‘A nationalist right enough’, *Irish University Review* (hereafter *IUR*), 6:1 (1976), 73–86 at 76.

equal, all races welded, all ideas welcome'.²⁸ As Kirwin has pointed out, 'O'Faolain regarded the Gaelic revival as merely a cult attempting to provide a smokescreen in order to delude the people about the gravity of social problems'.²⁹ Thus, starting from the premise that Ireland was a 'country at the beginning of its creative history, and at the end of its revolutionary history', *The Bell* sought to be truly republican by espousing social consciousness, alerting its readers to the real life conditions of fellow citizens, and examining long-ignored social issues.³⁰

Documentary journalism (1)

As Frank Shovlin has noted, O'Faolain's idea of having *The Bell's* journalism document the realities of Irish life was heavily influenced by journalistic developments in Britain. The rise of the British Left and the development of such initiatives as the Left Book Club and Mass Observation to distribute critical literature coincided with a drive towards journalistic realism based on investigation, observation and experiential or first-hand documentation of everyday life.³¹ The best example of this phenomenon in Britain was the monthly journal *Fact*, which in its first editorial stated that encyclopaedists 'were more responsible than any one other group for the French Revolution'. By spreading information 'in a form and in language that anyone could understand', they had made readers aware that 'the evils under their eyes were not isolated errors, but part of an imbecile system'. Established in 1937, *Fact* was edited by Raymond Postgate, a founding member of the Communist Party in Britain. Having edited the party's first weekly newspaper *The Communist*, he worked as a contributing editor for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, before becoming the founding editor of *Fact*. As Postgate saw it, *Fact's* mission was straightforward – to emulate the work of the original encyclopaedists and provide the knowledge 'to make a much more fundamental change than the French Revolution'.³²

This shift in journalistic direction did not go unnoticed in Ireland. As in Britain, Irish left-wing parties were seeking to make an impact through their education and publishing initiatives. In a 1932 report on communism, the Garda Commissioner, Eoin O'Duffy, recorded how the Communist Party of Britain was 'responsible for sending selected agitators to Ireland'. One such agitator was Brian O'Neill, who, according to O'Duffy 'was sent from

²⁸ 'The stuffed shirts', *Bell*, 6:3 (June 1943), 181–92 at 192.

²⁹ Kirwan, 'The social policy of *The Bell*', 101.

³⁰ 'Standards and taste', *Bell*, 2:3 (June 1941), 5–11 at 6.

³¹ Shovlin, *Irish literary periodical*, p. 103.

³² R. Postgate et al., 'Ourselves', *Fact*, 1:1 (Apr. 1937), 6–8 at 7.

England to push the sale of *The [Irish] Workers' Voice* and reorganise the Workers' Revolutionary Party'. O'Brien sat alongside Peadar O'Donnell on the governing committee of The Workers' College – a body established in 1932 to educate trade union leaders and promote left-wing critiques of society.³³ With the strong links between the Left in both countries there is no doubt that O'Faolain and O'Donnell would have been aware of the existence of Postgate and *Fact*. As individuals steeped in Irish historiography, both O'Faolain and O'Donnell would also have been aware of Postgate's well-received biography of Robert Emmet published in 1931 and translated into Irish by An Gum in 1936.³⁴ In addition, in 1934 Postgate's anti-war propaganda film, produced under the aegis of the British Socialist Alliance, was shown to the press in Dublin.³⁵ As Shovlin has pointed out, the type of articles published by *Fact* – 'I Joined the Army' by Soldier XYZ (May 1937), 'I Drive a Taxi' by Herbert Hodge (December 1938), and 'I am a Miner' by B.L. Coomber (January 1939) – would not have looked out of place in *The Bell*. Under O'Faolain's editorship, *The Bell* placed a similar emphasis on the reality of its readers' lives. In his first editorial, O'Faolain proclaimed that *The Bell* would be a journal concerned with the material not the abstract:

The Bell is quite clear about certain practical things and will, from time to time, deal with them – the Language, Partition, Education, and so forth. In general *The Bell* stands, in all such questions, for Life before any abstraction, in whatever magnificent words it may clothe itself. For we eschew abstractions, and will have nothing to do with generalisations that are not capable of proof by concrete experience. Generalisation (to make one) is like prophecy, the most egregious form of error, and abstractions are the luxury of people who enjoy befuddling themselves methodically. We prefer, likewise, the positive to the negative, the creative to the destructive. We ban only lunatics and sour-bellies.³⁶

Even *The Bell's* name was practical: as O'Faolain noted 'Any other equally spare and hard and simple word would have done; any word with a minimum of associations'. The old symbols of Ireland – 'Brien Boru, Granuaile, the Shan Van Vocht, Banba, Roisin Dubh, Fodhla, Caitleen ni Houlihan' – belonged to the time Irish people dreamed of a future. That future had, with independence, arrived and it was time for national symbols to be created

³³ Memo on communism & kindred groups – National Archives of Ireland, Taois / 97/9/73 [24 Nov. 1932], 5 & 11–12. See also *Irish Times*, 30 Mar. 1933.

³⁴ *Sunday Independent*, 17 Apr. 1932 & *Irish Press*, 9 July 1936. Postgate's books that address Irish history included *Robert Emmet* (1931), *Story of a year – 1848* (1955) and *Story of a year – 1798* (1969).

³⁵ *Irish Press*, 24 Nov. 1934.

³⁶ 'This is your magazine', *Bell*, 1:1 (Oct. 1940), 5–9 at 8–9.

afresh – ‘and the only way to create a living symbol is to take a naked think and clothe it with new life, new association, new meaning, with all of vigour of the life we live in the Here and Now’.³⁷

The ‘here and now’ (as opposed to past glories or future promise) was a cornerstone of O’Faolain’s and *The Bell*’s philosophy. Writing in 1970, O’Faolain noted that at the time of his youth, life consisted of ‘being filled from the age of four onward with – in the words of John Henry Newman – a profound mistrust of the reality of material phenomena; an early fear that all life may be a dream and all this physical world a deception’. He also noted how ideologies revelled ‘in the liquefaction of common life, the vaporisation of the mortal into the mystical, the veiling of the natural in the fumes of the supernatural, always at the expense of failing to develop the character of men as social animals’.³⁸ *The Bell* was to avoid all such ‘vaporisation’: it described itself as ‘not so much a magazine as a bit of Life itself’ and declared its preference for ‘the real thing, for the thing that is alive and kicking, as against the thing that is merely pretending to be alive’. In recording the ‘defeats and the victories, the squalors and the enchantments’ of everyday life, *The Bell* would stir its readers ‘to a vivid awareness of what we are doing, what we are becoming, what we are’. O’Faolain accordingly invited readers to contribute articles based on their own reality:

You who read this know intimately some corner of life that nobody else can know. You and Life have co-operated to make a precious thing which is your secret ... That is Life. You possess a precious store of it. If you will share it with all of us you will make this bell peal out a living message.³⁹

In the second issue, O’Faolain returned to this theme by reminding readers to write ‘from actual experience’, to avoid ‘abstract subjects’, and to write in a ‘polite and constructive way’.⁴⁰ It is clear that some readers felt differently. In the third issue, O’Faolain noted that some readers had ‘asked for more “fight” in *The Bell*’ and that he could fill the magazine ‘without difficulty with the articles that offer themselves for this section, which some may call Controversy, but all of which we reject without further consideration’. Such discourse was, he concluded, ‘the sort of thing that goes on, and on, night after night, in pubs and back-

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸ S. O’Faolain, ‘A portrait of the artist as an old man’, *IUR*, 6:1 (1976), 10–18 at 13.

³⁹ ‘This is your magazine’, *Bell*, 1:1 (Oct. 1940), 5–9 at 5, 8, 6 & 7.

⁴⁰ ‘For the future’, *Bell*, 1:2 (Nov. 1940), 5.

kitchens and front parlours, and never gets anywhere'.⁴¹ In the fifth issue, O'Faolain identified a problem that was to be a major factor in *The Bell's* ultimate demise: the unwillingness of the intelligentsia – 'our thinkers and students' – to raise their heads above the parapet of conventionality. All they offered him were 'vague, woolly articles, all personal opinion and no study'.⁴²

O'Faolain's editorials thus vacillated between what he deemed *The Bell's* success in documenting Irish life and despair at the lack of response that this documentary journalism elicited. Looking back at its first year of publication, O'Faolain noted that the magazine had remained faithful to its mission to 'ally ourselves with Life, as against abstract theorising, generalized arguments, loose impressionism':

We looked for living matter. We were loyal to experience. We printed a thing if it seemed to be alive, to have come out of experience – not to be brainspun or fancy-bred. We have printed things, at times, that were not of the first literary standard because they were real and true, and we would always lean primarily towards reality and veracity rather than towards a superficial literary perfection.⁴³

However, nine months later, O'Faolain decried the manner in which 'intellectual indifference is encouraged as a virtue in the masses' and how seldom could be heard a 'frank *public* discussion of any three of the following subjects – Birth Control, Freemasonry, The Knights of Columbanus, Unmarried Mothers, Illegitimacy, Divorce, Homo-sexuality, Rhythm, Lunacy, Libel, Euthanasia, Prostitution, Venereal Disease or even Usury'.⁴⁴ Later again, O'Faolain observed that 'with only one or two honourable exceptions our professors never open their mouths in public' and again called on its readers 'to take these pages and thrash out freely and constructively all the problems that face us'.⁴⁵

Documentary Journalism (2)

Despite such problems, during O'Faolain's editorship *The Bell* published articles on a host of social subjects that, to use a phrase from the time, would have been deemed 'indelicate' by the mainstream national newspapers. It examined in a critical way Dublin tenement life,

⁴¹ 'Answer to a criticism', *Bell*, 1:3 (Dec. 1940), 5–6 at 6.

⁴² 'A challenge', *Bell*, 1:5 (Feb. 1941), 5–6 at 6.

⁴³ 'Attitudes', *Bell*, 2:6 (Sept. 1941), 5–12 at 6.

⁴⁴ 'The mart of ideas', *Bell*, 4:3 (June 1942), 153–7 at 153 & 155.

⁴⁵ 'Silent Ireland', *Bell*, 6:6 (Sept. 1943), 457–66 at 461 & 466.

poverty and disadvantage, illegitimacy, public and mental health, unemployment, crime, prostitution, and the prison system. As observed by O’Faolain, such articles contained ‘no fog of preconceived notions, ideas, wishful thinking or prejudices’.⁴⁶ The picture of Ireland that emerged was not a pretty one. As one reviewer later put it, very often its best articles came from people who were ‘describing the one thing they have really *felt*, really *seen*, in all their lives’.⁴⁷ As conceded by O’Faolain, despite *The Bell’s* call for people to write of their own reality, very often he found that ‘a good deal of life is, for one thing, sadly inarticulate’. *The Bell* ‘could not just simply “let” Life speak for itself, for the simple reason that it often does not know how to speak at all’ and so its mission became ‘a question of *making* Life speak, of teaching it how to speak, even speaking for it’. Thus there had been many articles created by ‘somebody [who] had to go out with a notebook and listen, and encourage, and make a record. The poor would for ever remain silent if people did not, in this way, wrench speech out of them’.⁴⁸

One such article, ‘I Live in a Slum’ (by-lined ‘Recorded’) gave a stark insight into day-to-day life in one of Dublin’s many tenements. Told from the perspective of the male head of the household, it noted how he, his wife and five children shared one house with forty-nine other people, with one tap and one lavatory between them all. Work was irregular, food was basic and repetitive – tea, bread, margarine and stew – and the spectre of the moneylender loomed large.⁴⁹ Reacting to this article, an *Irish Times* reviewer noted that ‘it is well written – too well written – and has a starkness about it that, somehow or other, does not seem genuine’. If, the reviewer unkindly concluded, the article ‘was written – or dictated – by a slum-dweller, then perhaps he was at the Abbey Theatre the previous night’.⁵⁰ A subsequent article, ‘Slum Pennies’ (by-lined ‘Taken Down’) examined in detail how tenement residents got by through playing ‘a lot of tricks with pennies’, buying children’s clothes through hire-purchase, using moneylenders that charged 100 per cent interest rates, saving and later selling shopping coupons, and securing help from charities.⁵¹

A more in-depth investigation of tenement life, ‘Two Dublin Slums’ by Sheila May, contrasted de Valera’s assertion that there was nobody in the country that was ‘not getting proper food’ with the opinion of Rev. R.F. Kerr that ‘malnutrition, destitution, disease’ were widespread. As May noted, such claims and counter-claims, made by ‘people of position and

⁴⁶ ‘Why don’t we see it?’, *Bell*, 5:3 (Dec. 1942), 161–4 at 161.

⁴⁷ ‘Verdict on *The Bell*’, *Bell*, 10:2 (May 1945), 156–67 at 160.

⁴⁸ ‘Attitudes’, *Bell*, 2:6 (Sept. 1941), 5–12 at 5.

⁴⁹ ‘I live in a slum’, *Bell*, 1:2 (Nov. 1940), 46–8.

⁵⁰ *Irish Times*, 16 Nov. 1940.

⁵¹ ‘Slum Pennies’, *Bell*, 1:4 (Jan. 1941), 75–7.

importance [suggested that] at least half of them must be either misinformed or deliberately lying'. To determine who was telling the truth, May visited two tenement locations, the names of which, the article noted, had to be suppressed for fear of libel actions from landlords. At the first tenement, May found ninety people living in thirty rooms spread over six houses. The average number of people per room was three, but there were three cases of five people in one room and two cases of seven people in one room. Examining a sample room, May found that the window would not open and that dampness was seeping through the walls. The inhabitants' diet consisted of tea and bread and, as May observed, 'not one of these people, children or adults, ever touches fresh fruit or vegetables'. As a result nearly all the children suffered from TB, rickets, scabies or conjunctivitis: in addition, the only place for them to play was the small courtyard that housed the three lavatories that served all six houses. The second tenement was no better. Political independence had, May concluded, changed little for those trapped in the tenements; the only difference she could identify was that the names of the streets had been changed from English into Irish.⁵² *The Bell* also published a series of three articles written by Olivia Manning Robertson recounting her experiences of working as a play-leader in Dublin Corporation playgrounds, one of which hinted at paedophilia. Having encountered a crying child who told her that a man had offered her chocolates if she went home with him, Robertson brought the child to a garda station and witnessed a garda being dispatched to question the man. Robertson heard nothing more until six months later when she learned from the child that the man concerned had been found dead in one of Dublin's canals.⁵³

The plight of young mothers also came under the spotlight. Written by 'M.P.R.H.', 'Illegitimate' described the plight of the young mother of a three-week-old infant who appeared in court charged with begging. Sacked from her housekeeping job after her pregnancy had become apparent, she had given birth in a boarding house. Now in custody, the best the judge could do for her was to 'see what can be done about getting her home or into one of the institutions'. Having criticised what the author referred to as 'the export of Irish children in the name of lonely souls everywhere', the article broadened out to describe the disparity that existed in terms of unintended pregnancies in different socio-economic classes:

⁵² 'Two Dublin Slums', *Bell*, 7:4 (Jan. 1944), 351–6 at 354.

⁵³ 'Deformed', *Bell*, 9:2 (Nov. 1944), 129–34. See also, 'Out Patients', 7:6 (Mar. 1944), 510–4 and 'Court Circular' 10:5 (Aug. 1945), 395–401.

The well-off young woman confesses to her parents; she is hustled off, normally to London, Paris, Biarritz, comes back without the baby, and nobody is any the wiser. The poor girl can only turn to the Clergyman, the Dispensary Doctor, the District Nurse or Midwife.

Examining the homes run by religious orders, the author noted that ‘many refuse to go there because it means, in effect, two years’ imprisonment’. Although there is no overt reference to the later revelations of the conditions endured by these women, the author noted that while ‘down the staircase girls carry the wide, two-handled laundry baskets and the full graceful skirts of the Sisters sway over the parquet’, this ‘can give but little clue to the undercurrents of this ordered life.’⁵⁴

Other taboo subjects, such as public and mental health, were also openly examined. In his article on tuberculosis, ‘The Delicacy’, Robert Collis described the disease as ‘the curse of the Irish people [and] a lurking terror in the national mind; an evil thing; something to be feared and fled from; something best not spoken of, a shame which must be denied and hidden’. There was, he observed, ‘a veil of ignorance’ around the disease and the one easy step that could prevent the disease – ‘a simple order that in future all milk sold must be either obtained from certified tuberculosis-free herds, or pasteurised’ – had not been taken because it had ‘no vote catching appeal’. The woeful facilities for terminally ill patients – ‘built on the end of a windy pier, chiefly of corrugated iron and wood’ – were starkly described as ‘a horribly bleak and lonely place in which to face death’.⁵⁵ Again, political independence seemed to have resulted in no positive change: in a later article, Collis noted that ‘while even Northern Ireland has succeeded in reducing its mortality rate under British guidance we, masters at last of our own destiny, have actually allowed the disease to gain on us’.⁵⁶ But, as if to show that if the correct steps were taken patients could maintain a decent quality of life, *The Bell* published two first-hand accounts of surviving TB: Charles Woodlock’s ‘Two Years in a Sanatorium’ gave a positive account of the clean and comfortable conditions in which he recovered, while W.J. Heaney’s ‘I Fought T.B. and Won’ described his successful 13 months of treatment and encouraged sufferers to ignore the social taboo surrounding the disease and put themselves forward for treatment.⁵⁷ In its examination of mental health, *The Bell*

⁵⁴ ‘Illegitimate’, *Bell*, 2:3 (June 1941), 78–87, passim. See also M. Milotte, *Banished babies: the secret history of Ireland’s baby export business* (Dublin, 1997).

⁵⁵ ‘The Delicacy’, *Bell*, 1:5 (Feb. 1941), 33–39, passim.

⁵⁶ ‘A description of tuberculosis’, *Bell*, 8:3 (June 1944), 209–18, at 211.

⁵⁷ ‘Two years in a sanatorium’, *Bell*, 1:5 (Feb. 1941), 40–42; ‘I fought TB and won’, 8:4 (July 1944), 318–24.

published two articles. Although written from a British perspective, the first of these articles (by-lined ‘Medicus’) – gave an insight into how the mentally deficient were dealt with within the British judicial system. The second article – ‘Insanity in Ireland’ by ‘A Psychiatrist’ – sketched an outline history of mental illness in Ireland and, at a time when Ireland led the world in the number of psychiatric beds per 100,000 of the population, hinted at the ease with which people were committed to asylums. Seeking to ascertain whether there was ‘more insanity in Ireland than in other countries’, the author concluded that ‘in this country a large number of “mental deficients” who are in Mental Hospitals, come to be classified as insane. They would not be so classified in other countries’.⁵⁸

The Bell also published several dispiriting first-hand accounts of the alienation and poverty caused by unemployment and the dependence by the poor on pawnshops and moneylenders to get by on a weekly basis.⁵⁹ Another first-hand account consisted of an appraisal of crime levels in Dublin and a critique of its reportage in the press. Written by ‘Crime Reporter’, it observed that ‘a positive conspiracy of silence exists in Holy Ireland to cloak the doings of the unholy from the eyes of the just’. He noted that while soliciting – ‘and its attendant evils of wallet-stealing and, perhaps, blackmail’ – was fairly prevalent, in most cases it went unreported to the police ‘because of the natural reluctance of the man in the case to come forward’. And when sexual assault cases were prosecuted in the courts, he found that ‘few vice cases are ever mentioned in the press [and] a screen of official secrecy seems to shroud the whole question’.⁶⁰

A rare contribution from an academic, Edward Fahy, Reid professor of law at Trinity College, took a cool-headed and detailed look at the prison system. While concluding that there was ‘nothing in the treatment of our prison population which could be described as disgraceful’, there was much that he considered ‘unnatural, illogical, and unwise’. He found that ‘too much time [was] allowed for brooding and mental stagnation’, and that excessive regulation tended to ‘humiliate the prisoner and to destroy his individuality’.⁶¹ In his second article, Fahy examined the issue of juvenile crime and visited a borstal (or youth detention facility) in Co. Tipperary where he found that the lack of sporting facilities and the ‘gloomy stone structures’ that served as cells created an atmosphere that was ‘depressing and

⁵⁸ ‘Defectives in the dock’, *Bell*, 7:2 (Nov. 1943), 124–37; ‘Insanity in Ireland’, 7:4 (Jan. 1944), 303–10.

⁵⁹ ‘Off the dole’, *Bell*, 2:3 (June 1941), 44–6; ‘Neutral night’, 4:1 (Apr. 1942), 37–9; ‘People and pawnshops’, 5:3 (Dec. 1942), 206–8.

⁶⁰ ‘Crime in Dublin’, *Bell*, 5:3 (Dec. 1942), 173–83, passim. See also ‘Crime in Dublin (2)’, 5:4 (Jan. 1943), 301–7.

⁶¹ ‘The prisons’, *Bell*, 1:2 (Nov. 1940), 18–31, passim.

unnatural'.⁶² Over a year later, *The Bell* published Brendan Behan's account of his experience of detention in a borstal.⁶³ A subsequent six-part series on the first-hand experiences of a former prisoner, published throughout 1944–5, continued this vein of inquiry.⁶⁴ Later published in book form, in its preface Sean O'Faolain noted that the series was the first indication to the public that 'we put into our prisons men and women who are potentially excellent citizens, that we do nothing to rehabilitate them, that we treat them with unconscious brutality by condemning them not just for a set term of incarceration, but to a sort of solitary confinement for life'. The testimony contained in the series and the book was, O'Faolain concluded, 'an ironic and tragic pointer to the ideals of the Revolution and the distance that divides us from them in Ireland today'.⁶⁵ At this stage, having spent five-and-a-half years pointing out the disparities between the ideals and the results of revolution, O'Faolain decided to leave *The Bell*.

A lasting legacy

Sean O'Faolain wrote his last editorial for *The Bell* in April 1946. Over the course of his editorship, he had, he noted, said most of what he had wanted to say and he was conscious that *The Bell* needed 'a more optimistic note, at any rate a less pessimistic one than [he] had been compelled to sound'. In any event, he had 'grown a little weary of abusing our bourgeoisie, Little Irelanders, chauvinists, puritans, stuffed-shirts, pietists, Tartuffes, Anglophobes, Celtophiles, *et alii hujus generis*'.⁶⁶ In many ways, he felt he was fighting a one-man battle for modernity. In a 1944 editorial he had bemoaned the lack of public discussion *The Bell's* frank articles had provoked. While he had published articles on 'on a great many social and economic questions – Jails, Illegitimacy, Crime, Workhouses, Hospitalisation, Fisheries, Canning, Public Libraries, Jockeys, Mental Defectives, Housemaids, Other People's Incomes, Pawnshops, Flower Shows, T.B., Slums, Turf Cutting and so forth', they had not produced 'a whimper of comment'. In particular, he was disappointed that academics had not become involved in public discussion on these serious social issues. There was, he concluded, 'a weight of inertia, some large psychological frustration all over the nation and that until it is removed the energy cannot be released.'⁶⁷

⁶² 'The boy criminal', *Bell*, 1:3 (Dec. 1940), 41–50.

⁶³ 'I become a borstal boy', *Bell*, 4:3 (June 1942), 165–70.

⁶⁴ 'I did penal servitude', *Bell*, 9:1 (Oct. 1944) – 9:6 (Mar. 1945). The author 'D83222' was later identified as Walter Mahon-Smith.

⁶⁵ *Irish Times*, 5 Jan. 1946.

⁶⁶ 'Signing Off', *Bell*, 12:1 (Apr. 1946), 1–4 at 1.

⁶⁷ 'On editing a magazine', *Bell*, 9:2 (Nov. 1944), 93–101 at 100.

After O’Faolain’s resignation, *The Bell* effectively became a literary journal – though his successor, Peadar O’Donnell, occasionally included documentary journalism, including a new series of articles by ex-prisoner ‘D83222’, a first-hand account of the dispiriting nature of a visit to a labour exchange, and an article that examined the dependence of Dublin’s poor on pawnshops and moneylenders.⁶⁸ A break in publication between 1948 and 1950 followed, after which it returned as a quarterly publication that lasted until December 1954. The Mother and Child controversy of 1951 saw O’Faolain return briefly to observe that the republic had ‘two parliaments – a parliament in Maynooth and a parliament in Dublin’ – and that the old republican ideas were ‘washed up’.⁶⁹ In an editorial surveying the time-warp that was 1950s Ireland, *The Bell’s* associate editor Anthony Cronin observed that ‘the sad fact is that whatever has gone wrong with the country has gone wrong with the writers too, that the sleepiness, the dishonesty, the mental starvation and weakness of the country as a whole are quite as apparent from an editorial chair as from anywhere else’.⁷⁰ Ironically, writing five months after *The Bell’s* launch, O’Faolain had observed that ‘it would be sad if the Editorial Board ever closed the shutters with a sign of – “So you wouldn’t talk!”’.⁷¹

Despite its dispiriting end, *The Bell* had a profound influence on the development of journalism. By examining the real life experiences of people rather than propagate the idealisms of religion and nationalism, *The Bell* played a central role in prompting journalism to develop beyond the confines of party affiliation and, as Bill Kirwan has observed, it ‘lay the groundwork for the development of social policy and analysis in Ireland following the Second World War’.⁷² Its pioneering of documentary journalism was taken up with gusto by the *Irish Times* in the early 1960s. Amid the reinvention of that title by Douglas Gageby – who studied in Trinity College in the early 1940s and who could not but have been aware of *The Bell* – the appointment of Michael Viney, an English journalist with an interest in social affairs, added an outsider’s critical distance and perspective to the *Times’s* coverage of social issues.

The documentary journalism produced by Viney between 1963 and 1972 – which included series entitled ‘Mental Illness in Ireland’ (1963), ‘Alcoholism’ (1964), ‘No Birthright – The Unmarried Mother and Her Child’ (1964), ‘A World Made Mad – A Study of Schizophrenia’ (1965), ‘Young Offenders’ (1966), ‘Drugs in Ireland’ (1968), ‘Broken

⁶⁸ ‘There but for the grace of God’, *Bell*, 12:1 (Apr. 1946) – 12:3 (June 1946); ‘The labour exchange’, 16:5 (Feb. 1951), 58–62; ‘Monday is pawnday’, 14:5 (Aug. 1947), 46–50.

⁶⁹ ‘The Dáil and the bishops’, *Bell*, 17:3 (June 1951), 5–13 at 5.

⁷⁰ ‘This time, this place’, *Bell*, 19:8 (July 1954), 5–7 at 6.

⁷¹ ‘A challenge’, *Bell*, 1:5 (Feb. 1941), 5–6 at 6.

⁷² Kirwan, ‘The social policy of *The Bell*’, 100.

Marriages' (1970), 'Blind in Ireland' (1971), 'The Protestant Million – Protestants in the North' (1971) – mirrored the topics examined by *The Bell*. Such was the interest generated that his articles were reproduced in pamphlet form by the *Irish Times*. In a similar vein, throughout the 1970s Eileen O'Brien's 'A Social Sort of Column', also published in the *Irish Times*, continued this renewed interest in social enquiry by examining issues such as the elderly in nursing homes, the homeless, and the wives of alcoholics. By that time, the other national newspaper titles had come to realise the importance of social affairs journalism and the appointment of women editors (Mary Maher at the *Irish Times*, Mary Kenny at the *Irish Press*, and Mary McCutchan at the *Irish Independent*) ensured that social issues – such as contraception, divorce, single parenthood and equal pay – received prominent coverage throughout the 1970s. By the 1980s, periodicals such as *In Dublin* and *Magill* had taken up the mantle of producing incisive social affairs journalism. *The Bell's* mission had finally come full circle.