Introduction: Rebel by vocation

A whole generation since 1922 has gone rotten like fruit badly kept or evaporated like your da’s whiskey. (Seán O’Faoláin)¹

In the summer of 1947 the writer Frank O’Connor returned home to Ireland to find a country still locked in an atmosphere of post-war stagnation; for him, it was one that was in direct opposition to the dynamism and progression of Clement Attlee’s Britain, which had undertaken a programme of nationalisation that would culminate in the formation of the National Health Service in 1948. As an artist O’Connor felt that this national quiescence was reflected in Irish literature, and a whole generation of artists had failed to deliver on the promise of the cultural revival to develop a great national art:

I’m only back from England and in a state of complete disillusionment with this country. The first thing I did was re-order my books so that the complete Irish section now forms portion of a larger English unit. What’s the point of pretending that Sean [O’Faoláin] or Peadar [O’Donnell] or any of the lads after Yeats is anything except a damp squib? ‘Irish Literature’ is simply a dope we give ourselves to reassure ourselves of the continuity; … none of us will get anywhere until we say ‘I’m a writer in my own right, and I hate every son of a bitch in this country, and be jasus I’ll kick it into culture before I die.’ I haven’t yet reached that point; only the disillusionment and the loathing of the smugness on part of the boys.²

O’Connor’s dismissive assessment of the condition of Irish letters is telling, in that it points to a sense of failure and hopelessness on behalf of the generation of Irish writers who had worked in the shadow of W.B. Yeats and James Joyce, and had struggled to survive in an indifferent Irish market under a frustrating state censorship. It also points to something of O’Connor’s own volatile character and oscillating moods. By 1947 he had finished his association with Ireland’s premier literary magazine The Bell (1940–54) and was still frustrated by what had been, on his part, an acrimonious split. O’Connor, along with Seán O’Faoláin and Peadar O’Donnell, was part of the original editorial board of The
Bell, a magazine that had been formed with the express intention of kicking Ireland into culture.

This book contextualises the magazine within the Irish society of its day, and looks at the coterie of writers that gathered around The Bell under its first editor and most important figure, Seán O’Faoláin. Why these writers felt compelled to launch a magazine is the subject of some debate, and their place in the Irish literary canon is also much misunderstood. Critically, authors such as O’Faoláin, O’Connor and Liam O’Flaherty have been sandwiched between the colossal figures linked with modernism in Yeats, Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and for some time remembered as the reactionary writers of twee short stories about ‘wee Anne going to her first confession, stuff about country funerals, old men in chimney nooks after 50 years in America, will-making, match-making’, and yet this is not the complete story. Beckett too was dismissive of O’Faoláin and the other writers within his circle; writing to his friend Thomas McGreevy he complained: ‘In the train from Bray, vainly unrecognized, the pestiferous Michael Farrell fresh from Kilmacanogue & next doordom to All Forlorn [Seán O’Faoláin] (whose elucubration on Coriolanus at the Abbey I trust you read at the Chelsea Library). He is finishing a work, really very beautiful, & admired by All Forlorn, himself naively 5 minutes later extolled by Farrell as a critic!’

Despite this hostility, O’Faoláin and the generation of writers that assembled around him in The Bell were among Ireland’s most internationally celebrated authors within their own time and formed a recognised role within its cultural elite. Their work is much less popular today, partly because of the hostility with which it was viewed by a contemporaneous generation of writers (like Flann O’Brien and Samuel Beckett) who were reacting against their prominence, and partly because of a critical misreading within the academy of their work that neglects them by interpreting the history and, by extension, the culture of post-independence Ireland as stifled, muted and isolated. It is this misreading that this book attempts to rectify. For some, the ‘introspective literary scene of the Free State was understandably largely absorbed in adjusting to the often disheartening realities of independence, as shown in the commitment of many to what were essentially mimetic modes of writing – the short stories of Seán O’Faoláin and Frank O’Connor.’ For mimetic here read imitative, restricted and, ultimately, inferior; a generation of diverse and complicated writers are contrasted with an expansive, experimental and progressive modernism embodied, in Ireland’s case, in Yeats and Joyce. However, this is to do a disservice to O’Faoláin and his contemporaries who wrote from a range of perspectives and for a variety of reasons, as The Bell itself demonstrates. That their first love was the Russian realists was a matter of choice; O’Faoláin’s most prized books were the fifteen-volume collected Novels of Turgenev published between 1894 and 1899 and translated by Constance Garnett. It was not through ignorance of the challenges of modernist experimental writing that this
choice was made. At least that is how they viewed themselves, and there were few as immersed in the traditions of international literature as O'Faoláin, and indeed his close childhood friend, O'Connor.

O'Connor was a committed supporter of Yeats, and although he was later in life dismissive of Joyce, he did take the opportunity to seek out the great writer in Paris as a young man. O'Faoláin, for his part, was unashamedly supportive of both writers, beginning a PhD on Yeats and writing frequently of his admiration for Joyce, although like many other readers he baulked at the complexity of *Finnegans Wake*.

It is the writers of *The Bell*, with O'Faoláin to the fore, that are examined here, especially in light of their own conception of themselves as a generation and the concomitant pressures and reactions that this entailed. In one of his less disconsolate moods, O'Connor was able to conceive of the burden that he seemingly shared with O'Faoláin to produce something of a national literature, but at an international standard. He felt the baton had been passed from Yeats to the younger writers, and it was their responsibility to hand it on to a younger generation. It was this desire which was made manifest in *The Bell*:

> Anglo-Irish is a different subject, and it’s no use pretending I can teach it, though I do my best. The trouble is John, it’s all Yeats, whatever you say; Joyce only slinks in as a negation of Yeats – Yeats as he might have been if he’d only had talent and no brains, no character and no decency. I am beginning to feel a respect for Sean and myself. At least we are not a mere negation of Yeats; we are like Paul and the apostles, poor devils who do the best we can to make intelligible the preposterous ideas of that Sligo Christ [Yeats], adopting them to history and to Cork.

O'Connor’s naming of Cork is significant here, criticism of O'Faoláin and O'Connor was tied to their presence in Dublin as interlopers from Éire’s second city. Their own sense of friendship and loyalty had been honed under the tutelage of Daniel Corkery (a man whom they would later bitterly resent and attack) as two young students who were aspiring artists in post-Civil War Cork. This tension between the local and the universal, so admirably articulated by Patrick Kavanagh in ‘Parochialism and Provincialism’, plagued the post-independence generation of writers as the nation struggled to express its own identity on an international stage. The fear of accusations of provincialism worried Cork men going to Dublin and Dublin men going to London, and this was especially acute with the added stresses of the Second World War in a globalised world that was rapidly tearing itself apart.

That Cyril Connolly equally worried in London about the isolation that war imposed on the metropolitan artist was of little consolation in Ireland; yet with the benefit of hindsight we can see that this isolation was not as complete as it appeared to those who experienced it at the time. Connolly, O'Faoláin, and a whole host of other international literary editors and artists, such as
R.P. Blackmur, formed part of a network or exchange that was remarkable for its productivity, despite their claims about isolation and other ‘enemies of promise’.11 They were, in effect, part of an Atlantic world of letters that struggled to make sense of their time, and to promote the production of art under trying circumstances. Even W.H. Auden felt the pressure that war exerted on artists and felt sure that no great novel would be produced for its duration, claiming:

Times of crisis, like our own, are unfavourable to the art of the novelist. The realistic novelist, trying to write about Europe to-day, is like a portrait-painter whose model refuses to sit still. He may hope to catch certain impressions, jot down a few suggestive notes – but the big, maturely considered masterpiece must wait for better times. Most of what passes for fiction is, of necessity, only a kind of high-grade news-reporting. The writer is far too close to his violently moving, dangerous subject.12

Auden’s nod to news-reporting here is noteworthy, as journalism was the mode of choice for many writers during the war, including O’Faoláin.

That O’Faoláin and those around him appealed so vocally and consistently in their journalism against the perceived indifference and philistinism of Irish society has led to their artistic output being considered as an extension of their political writings. They are now seen as naturalists in the same mode as Émile Zola and their work concerned with exposing the hypocrisy and bad faith of Irish society; as one critic has argued:

No one can doubt that the social and sexual problems depicted in naturalism were actual and pressing. The issue is not that naturalism invented or even exaggerated the social grimness that would become the trademark topic. But what can be questioned is the inference that the communities thus depicted were so helplessly paralysed, so bereft of internal dissident forces and resources, as naturalism would typically suggest … It was as if the colourless monotony of the society – as the naturalists conceived of it at least – could only be conveyed in a drab, colourless, monotonous aesthetic. When compared to the altogether more outward-looking and experimental modernists, the naturalists seem to replicate the very conditions of backwardness or inward-looking provincialism their own works protest.13

There are several points worth considering here in this criticism of the Irish naturalists (O’Faoláin, O’Connor and others of The Bell generation). First, the critic is right to point out the points of resistance to social inertia in Irish society. There was a vibrant popular culture at work in post-independence Ireland, as is evidenced by the sheer numbers of dance halls, cinemas and sporting arenas that sprang up across the country at that time. Second, there is nothing in naturalism as a form that inherently ties a monotonous society to a ‘monotonous aesthetic’; after all, Zola’s own gritty realism was produced at the height of belle époque France.

Irish artists may have felt obliged to develop a readership for their work, and
may have suffered under censorship, but the real issue was indifference from the public to what was perceived as elitist artistic production in the main, something that has been present throughout modern western history, and not just in Ireland. That said, this criticism of writers such as O’Faoláin is wrong to depict a coherent or developed school of naturalistic writing against an experimental, progressive modernism, even in aesthetic terms. Much of O’Faoláin’s writing is not naturalistic nor is it even overtly political. It is concerned with aesthetics, mystery, romance and Catholicism as well as politics, and would not fit easily within a naturalistic definition. O’Faoláin himself regularly identified a romantic streak to his writing that was more in line with writers of the Revival and his youth than with any naturalistic school:

The romantic [O’Faoláin] doesn’t give a damn if nobody is looking at him. He’s looking at himself. He’s seeing God looking at him – the Gods, and the Glory, and if he were all alone on a desert island he’d dress up in regimentals and wave a sword [sic] and shout, ‘To glory. Follow my white plume’ – and start fighting the waves. If he were an Irishman he’d then sit down and laugh himself sick at himself.14

Seen in this light then, O’Faoláin and the writers he gathered round him lived in a complex relationship to those of the previous generation, and in a complex relationship to modernism as a movement so defined by us today. Modernism and its connections with O’Faoláin and The Bell are problematised by this study; the traditional opposition between an outward-looking modernism and an inward-looking naturalism are challenged here. Mark Quigley has defined O’Faoláin’s work as inhabiting a place on a late modernist spectrum, one that deploys ‘postcolonial realism’ that ‘constitutes at once a critique of mainline modernism and an alternative late-modernist practice’.15 However, this study sees debates around modernism as placing O’Faoláin and his generation at a critical disadvantage, caught between the vice of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett abroad and domineered by W.B. Yeats at home. The writers of The Bell had their faults, but they also had a difficult literary landscape to navigate in post-independence Ireland.

Internationalist or European has long been a synonym for modernist within literary criticism, especially when comparing Irish writing to some of the giants of high modernism, such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Joyce or Ezra Pound. But in doing so the force of critical interpretation places O’Faoláin and the generation of The Bell at a loss. They came to maturity at a time when Yeats and Joyce were at the height of their powers and struggled to define themselves in an Irish world of letters being canonised around these two figures. However, this is not to say that their own work was reactionary or that they rejected the challenges set by a modernist aesthetic. Rather, no one argues persuasively why they should have accepted that challenge in the first place; they wrote
of what they knew, in a mode that they had mastered. Both writers were well aware of their reputation as being excessively in thrall to the Russian realists. As O’Connor wryly remarked to their joint friend, the Harvard Professor John V. Kelleher, ‘the atmosphere of Dublin was lovely, relaxed and not too hostile, the only discord being an article in the I.T. [Irish Times] which suggested that Irish literature had been put astray when Sean and I got Turgenev out of the Cork public library and referring younger writers back to the real Irish source – Samuel Lover!’

Their writing came from a Russian base, through a French model, and in an Irish context; it is hard to see a more European or internationalist set of influences on Irish writing. Their critical exclusion from wider movements in global literature is unusual, especially as some of their contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Bowen, are now considered at the forefront of Irish modernism. Not that O’Faoláin’s work should be considered modernist in itself, it is not, but just that, outside of Yeats and Joyce, he was arguably the most recognised figure in post-independence Irish letters at an international level for several decades. The term ‘internationalist’ is used in this book to mean that the writers of *The Bell* generation had lived abroad, were alive to the artists and literary traditions of other countries, and were in connection and exchange with their international peers. It also aims to show that if modernism in an Irish context is wide enough to include the paintings of Basil Rakoczi or the architecture of Barry Byrne then *The Bell* also included writers within that mode, or who were knowingly operating within that tradition, with Nick Nicholls and Freda Laughton perhaps being the most prominent examples. Their presence, along with other experimental writers, undermines the claim that ‘while avant-garde experimentalism thrived in continental Europe … it is difficult it trace any such tendency in Ireland’. If modernism had seen its apotheosis in 1922 then its impact was well understood by the time O’Faoláin and his contemporaries were in the ascendant in the 1930s; to put his writing in context, his second novel *Bird Alone* was first published in 1936, two years later than Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934. If anything, the debate around the usefulness of modernism as a helpful critical term in understanding Irish writing and writers in the twentieth century is drawn into focus when discussing a little magazine that ran for fourteen years across so many authors and fields. For example, *The Bell* contained some important works of the distinctly modern but also distinctly unmodernist Patrick Kavanagh.

Kavanagh, perhaps more than any other Irish author responding to Joyce and Yeats, showed the way to escape from their shadow. The distinctive lyrical force of his work puts him outside the formal experiments of high-modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot, yet his poetry is among the most distinctly modern writing in *The Bell*. His calm confidence in writing of the ‘ordinary plenty’ of Irish life gave a younger generation of writers, such as Seamus Heaney, the
Introduction: Rebel by vocation

‘permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life’, and avoid the epic mytho-poetic dominance of Yeats. So The Bell and its writers exist in a position of resisting easy categorisation, inhabiting a space that is critically difficult to define and draws into question the suitability of modern critical models to delineate such an elusive subject as that little magazine. As Edna Longley has shown for Yeats, but in an argument that could equally be applied to The Bell:

Some critics distance what they call ‘modernism’ from Ireland. Others collapse it into Ireland. If Yeats’s poetry slips through the cracks, the remedy may not be to talk of ‘modernisms’ or ‘poetries’ but rather to revisit the inter-national dynamics that created modern poetry in English.

Similarly, this book looks to the international dynamics that created the modern literary magazine that informed the composition of The Bell and the writers who made up its editors and contributors, including those who chose to engage with the style that we now identify as modernist, but just as importantly, those that did not. As the literary public house replaced the literary at-homes as the main source for social interaction between artists, The Bell stands as the printed testimony to this transition from writers who had cut their teeth under the gaze of Yeats and AE (George Russell), to a new type of artist with a more public and less elitist reputation as best embodied by Brendan Behan or Patrick Kavanagh.

For O’Faoláin The Bell was about producing a sustained, low-key criticism of life and art in Éire. He wanted to slowly build up standards in line with other international magazines by publishing the best of Irish talent alongside the best of international talent. As he reminded O’Connor, The Bell was not a blast of explosive experimentalism, but the slow boil of creative criticism:

We do not keep a dog that barks. You will recollect that we set out to be a natural sort of sane, and quiet, and constructive paper such as any normal country should produce – to use one of your own phrases when ‘breathing naturally’. I do not know that we are thereby ‘getting anywhere’. It is just a corner of sanity and intelligence and decency. A tiny piece of construction. Barking is not our line. It was not the AE line in the Statesman. I do not notice that it is the line in any periodical I know – Yale Review, Virginia Quarterly, Horizon, Life and Letters, London Mercury. Are all these ‘dead ends’? You see – you want controversy, dramatics, fight, explosions.

This book focuses on these writers, led by O’Faoláin and O’Donnell in their capacity as editors, who contributed to The Bell and formed part of the cultural vanguard of Irish writing, that sought to develop Irish standards, both aesthetic and critical, to match their ambitions. This project was, from the outset, self-consciously about the formation of a group capable of leading Ireland in its cultural rejuvenation:
The breech is made … If I can get the Bell to take in every sort of person from Kerry to Donegal, and bind them about you and me and Peadar [O'Donnell] and Roisin [Walsh] do you not see that we are forming a nucleus? Take the long view – bit by bit we are accepted as the nucleus. Bit by bit we can spread ideas, create REAL standards, ones naturally growing out of Life and not out of literature and Yeats and all that. It is going to take years and years. Explosions and rages get nowhere. You sit down there on your backside and do the highfalutin’ artist, while up here, painstakingly, I am doing a spot of real construction.23

The construction of a new Irish identity is what O’Faoláin felt The Bell would contribute to the world of letters, but also to Irish society in general. The magazine was much more than an outlet for writers in Ireland, it was also engaged politically, which explains its tendency towards Mass Observation inspired articles and direct criticism, albeit limited by what wartime censorship would allow. No attempt has been made to address The Bell’s theoretical underpinnings in the world of sociology, nor to evaluate the contribution of Mass Observation to its composition, and this is a gap that is addressed here.

O’Faoláin, The Bell and Irish literary periodicals have seen some renewed interest from the academy since the publication of Frank Shovlin’s seminal The Irish Literary Periodical 1923–1958 (2003) and an upswing in awareness on O’Faoláin around the centenary of his birth in 2000.24 The publication of new studies into magazine culture and journalism in Ireland has also brought some much needed perspective to the field and widened our understanding of the period.25 This work has been supplemented by the publication of letters from O’Faoláin that add to the earlier foundations set by Maurice Harmon in O’Faoláin criticism.26 Most recently, we have seen the publication of two considerable contributions to our knowledge on The Bell and O’Faoláin in Kelly Matthews’s The Bell Magazine and the Representation of Irish Identity (2012) and Paul Delaney’s Seán O’Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s (2014).27 This book seeks to add to the work already done here and contribute to our understanding of O’Faoláin as a writer and The Bell as a magazine. This is done through a biography of the magazine itself, with its first editor O’Faoláin to the fore, also analysing those who wrote for it. It throws some light on the Ireland of the period and complicates the picture of an inward-looking, isolationist island bereft of humour. By putting O’Faoláin, O’Donnell, and those who gathered around them in The Bell into focus, those writers are placed not only in their international framework, but also into the local, in the petty and provincial backbiting that characterised much of their interactions. It follows the work already set down for writers such as W.H. Auden or Cyril Connolly in a British setting, but widens the scope to include Ireland, putting O’Faoláin in the proper context of his international peers.28 If R.F. Foster has recently shown that those who took up arms in 1916 were a diverse and complex group, then this study shows that the generation that followed them
were equally divergent and complicated in their motives and ambitions. Theirs was a new Ireland to make, and O’Faoláin and The Bell generation were at the forefront of the cultural elite that sought to establish itself in the decades after the revolution and civil war.29

Notes
1 Seán O’Faoláin to John V. Kelleher (22 August 1948), John V. Kelleher Correspondence, Boole Library, University College Cork, BL/L/JVK/25. Hereafter referred to as UCC.
2 Frank O’Connor to John V. Kelleher (June 1947), UCC, BL/L/JVK/152.
3 Myles Na Gopaleen, ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’, Irish Times (4 October 1954), p. 4. Myles Na Gopaleen is one of several pen names for Brian O’Nolan. Where possible the given spelling is maintained.
8 Frank O’Connor to John V. Kelleher (26 February 1952), UCC, BL/JVK/179.
11 Cyril Connolly, Enemies of Promise (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938). Connolly’s work is preoccupied with the social conditions that prevent the production of great art, a topic O’Faoláin would return to again and again in his editorial work in The Bell.
14 Seán O’Faoláin to John V. Kelleher (September 1948), UCC, BL/L/JVK/26.
16 Frank O’Connor to John V. Kelleher (n.d.), UCC, BL/L/JVK/172.
17 The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism does not mention Seán O’Faoláin, or The Bell in any detail despite discussing the White Stag Group, and the importance of editors, magazines and collectors to Irish modernism. See Joe Cleary (ed.), The
Rebel by vocation


19 Fionna Barber sees *The Bell* as important in supporting modernist painting in Ireland, especially the White Stag Group during the war. See Fionna Barber, *Art in Ireland since 1910* (London: Reaktion, 2013), pp. 95–106.


22 Seán Ó Faoláin to Frank O’Connor (n.d.), Frank O’Connor Collection, Gotlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University (Box 3, Folder 6). Hereafter referred to as Gotlieb.

23 Seán Ó Faoláin to Frank O’Connor (n.d.), Gotlieb (Box 3, Folder 6).


