



## The Bell

### THE BELL

A well-known  
 periodical of the  
 20<sup>th</sup> Century

It first appeared in October  
 1940, under the editorship of  
 Sean O'Faoláin

Right: First edition of The Bell, 1940  
 (image: The Irish Times, the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2023)

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# THE BELL – a famous periodical

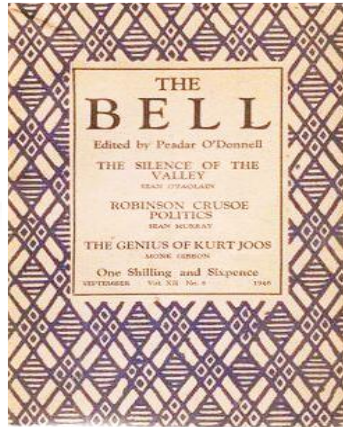


There was a time in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland when literary magazines, which covered a wide variety of topics, were popular. Think of RTE radio's 'Sunday Miscellany' in printed form and you are approaching the right idea. Many of these were founded and supported more out of conviction and dedication rather than on financial viability, and as a result, many had short lifespans. One of the more famous of these periodicals was The Bell.

The Bell first appeared in October 1940, under the editorship of Seán O'Faoláin, who greeted readers with '*this is your magazine.*' Ireland, he argued, needed new writing, which bravely and accurately registers the "Truth" of Irish life. Write about your gateway, your well-field, your street-corner, your girl, your boat-slip, pubs, books, pictures, dogs, horses, river, tractor, anything at all that has a hold on you.<sup>1</sup>

The Bell was born in an era when the public face of Ireland was conservative. This was manifest via the institutions of the State and of course, the Church. Ireland had a very active literary Censorship Board. Some of The Bell's most famous contributors knew too well that a 'belt' of a ban from the censors could arrive at any time.

The magazine sought to be a progressive voice by writing about ordinary things. It tried to be the opposite of what it saw as the narrow, controlled, conservative run of Irish public life and discourse. The magazine was supposed to be a miscellany, but it always included short stories and even some poetry. Many of Ireland's most famous writers of that era contributed to the magazine. Patrick Kavanagh, Anthony Cronin (who later acted as editor), Jack B. Yeats, Flann O'Brien (Myles na gCopaleen), Benedict Kiely, Valentine Iremonger, Thomas Kinsella, Kate O'Brien, Louis MacNeice, Elizabeth Bowen, Liam O'Flaherty, Brendan Behan, James Plunkett, Val Mulhern, Mary Beckett, Benedict Kiely and David Marcus were all published in the magazine.



**The Bell, Vol.7, No.6, 1946**  
(Wikipedia.org, Ryan family & pub.)

O'Faoláin's six years as editor ended with a rather despondent editorial. His hopes for a new type of writing that fitted and reflected the emerging Ireland had not materialised, at least not to his satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Irish writers tended to write about the past, in a sentimental way, instead of observing everyday life. "*You wouldn't believe how many stories about fiddlers I get*" O'Faoláin complained. However The Bell published more than 200 short stories in its lifespan, and offered an outlet and mentorship to emerging writers.<sup>3</sup>

O'Faoláin was succeeded as editor by Peadar O'Donnell, a prominent Republican, who had a more relaxed attitude to the content in his magazine.

Always entertaining, a collection of its best articles, published in 1978, contains pieces such as 'A June Sunday in Armagh' (Benedict Kiely), 'I Did Penal Servitude' (a first-hand account of becoming a prisoner in Portlaoise Prison in the 40s) published using only the author's Prisoner Number, D8322; and Myles na Gopaleen's funny and piercing piece 'The Dancehalls'.

In keeping with the style of the magazine, this latter article was accessible, populated with characters recognisable to ordinary readers who themselves liked to visit 'these vestibules of hell' of a Sunday night.

Among such characters we find the young man who takes his girlfriend to a dress dance, but still manages to fit in a night's drinking in a pub down the street: '*an odd accomplishment that no stranger can acquire. It is the craft of going out for twenty separate drinks to a pub 400 yards away without ever appearing to have left the hall at all. It is a waste of time seeking to solve this puzzle by observation. If you are a lady, you can dance every dance with the one gentleman, talk to him unremittingly in the intervals and yet you will notice him getting gayer and gayer from his intermittent but imperceptible absences.*

*If, on the other hand, you are a man who is seated in the pub all night concerned only with honest drinking, you will observe the complementary miracle and wonder how the inebriate in tails manages to satisfy all the requirements of his partner in the hall without ever appearing to leave the pub. There it is. I can offer no explanation'.<sup>4</sup>*

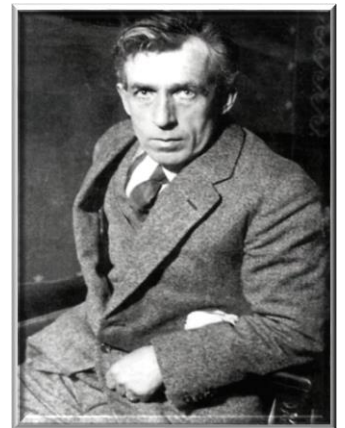
Although the magazine ceased publication for financial reasons in the late 1940s, it made a comeback, and finally folded in 1954. The Bell has been called 'the most influential and significant of Irish literary magazines'.<sup>5</sup>

## REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup> The Bell, vol.1, no.1, October 1940
- <sup>2</sup> The Irish Times, the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2023
- <sup>3</sup> Phyllis Boumans, thejournal.ie, 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2023
- <sup>4</sup> The Bell, Vol.1, no.5, February 1941
- <sup>5</sup> The Irish Times, the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2023



**Seán O'Faoláin in earlier years**  
(ricorso.net)



**Peadar O'Donnell**  
(Wikipedia.org)



**Seán O'Faoláin in 1964**  
(B. Gotfryd, Wikimedia.org)