



**Matthews, Kelly. *The Bell Magazine and the Representation of Irish Identity: Opening Windows*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012.**

In the posthumous 1993 edition of his autobiography *Vive Moi!*, Sean O’Faolain records that “When I began to edit our monthly periodical *The Bell* some Dublin wag said 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” (315). Subsequently, over the following two pages he proceeded to reflect in broad terms on his own and Ireland’s relationship with the world while ignoring completely the publication that critics almost unanimously consider the most important of its kind in twentieth-century Ireland. The chapter, only 6 pages long, was by far the shortest in the autobiography and appears to confirm his daughter Julia’s contention that, then in his 80s, the public man had gone private and was no longer “roused” by his time at *The Bell* (318).

This neglect is not, however, exclusive to O’Faolain. In the introduction to Kelly Matthews’s excellent study of *The Bell*, she notes that the magazine has suffered a curious fate in that it is so well known that the perception among critics is that it has, if anything, already been over-analysed, while in reality hers is the first full-length critical study on the magazine yet published (4-5). It is thus a pioneering work and Matthews’s hope that her engagement with *The Bell* “will reinvigorate discussion of the magazine and its impact on Irish society” is a welcome one (5).

So welcome and well-received has the study been that in a review for the *Times Literary Supplement* Declan Kiberd, after lamenting O’Faolain’s lack of prominence in recent decades, concludes by recognising that Matthews’s book serves to remind us that O’Faolain was “a postcolonial intellectual par excellence,” while admitting that “Her beautifully written study is a deserved (if only implicit) rebuke to those of us who have excluded O’Faolain from a more central place in accounts of the invention of Ireland” (4).

In part, the central role Kiberd latterly gives to O’Faolain is because of his appreciation of the real influence the Corkman had in bringing about change in society, yet, as Matthews is at pains to show, this was precisely because *The Bell* was a meeting hall for a diversity of protagonists, styles and interests. Kiberd’s interpretation of Matthews’s book understandably centres on the inspiring figure of O’Faolain but much of what is most valuable about the study comes from the author’s ability to go beyond the huge personality of the magazine’s first editor.

More than anything Matthews gives us a nuanced picture of *The Bell*, its initial and evolving values, its conflicts and its eventual demise. She captures most accurately how the magazine served as a debating forum open to everyone where alternative and

competing voices could gain expression. Famously, Vivian Mercier wrote “For Seán O’Faolain is *The Bell*,” a claim that would seem to give succour to those who saw in the editor an overly fussy, even authoritarian figure, yet an interpretation which here finds an immediate riposte in the fact that Mercier’s critique was published in the magazine itself (30). Ultimately, it was, as O’Faolain himself put it, “a highly democratic vessel” (29).

Matthews clarifies in her introduction that she reads *The Bell* as “a collaborative endeavour, the collective work of editors, writers, and readers combined” and this holistic approach is reflected in the close attention to detail which allows her to offer valuable insights that serve to question some of the more commonly held perceptions as to the ideological values which underpin the whole project (3). For example, the documentary approach which marked particularly the early years is shown to be not merely the result of a desire to contest the idealised discourse of the independent state but, to a degree, part of a broader turn to the documentary form in the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, in what is a key touchstone to the study as a whole, Matthews reveals the subtle manner in which the initial emphasis on “representation” evolves into a creative tension with what she calls a focus on “transformation,” before linking this dialogue with the concern to reinterpret or refashion Irish identity away from the constricting mould hegemonic since independence.

In essence, this transformation achieves expression through a plural debate around alternatives of Irishness which complicates the official version of a putatively authentic Gaelic, Catholic people in harmonious rural existence, while simultaneously opening windows on to the world. Matthews, for example, pays attention to how by means of the juxtaposition of articles an attempt was made “to provoke the reader to reflect on the multifariousness of life in contemporary Ireland” (58). A prime illustration of this can be found in the very first issue in which we find an anonymous article “Orphans” competing for protagonism with an autobiographical piece, “The Big House,” by Elizabeth Bowen. The critical sensitivity shown by Matthews in relation to the strategic juxtaposition of articles is also complemented by some very valuable work on the Boston University Gotlieb archive which lends authority to her overall thesis. Through her examination of the correspondence between O’Faolain and the first poetry editor, Frank O’Connor, the author reveals, for example, that the abovementioned “Orphans” contribution was in fact a transcription from the oral history of O’Connor’s mother who had been brought up in a convent orphanage (115).

A further insight from the archive is especially interesting. Interpreting as evidence of an agenda of “transformation” apparent in the magazine’s commitment towards improving or instructing the population on good taste and in relation to the nurturing of emerging writers – notably in the “New Writers,” “Belfry” and “The Country Theatre” features-, Matthews highlights how O’Connor, in his role as poetry editor, exhibited what she considers to be “strongly nationalist views about the purpose of poetry,” while to new writers uncompromisingly insisting upon their depiction of everyday life rather than any “vague romanticism” (48). Given critics’ frequent insistence

that both O’Faolain and *The Bell* were essentially anti-nationalist, Matthews’s reading would initially appear to point to a potential source of disagreement between O’Connor and the main editor. Conflict did indeed arise but for precisely the opposite reason. When in his April 1941 contribution to “The Belfry” O’Connor chose to praise and publish the Welsh poet Cynric Mytton-Davies, O’Faolain took immediate objection. Quoting an undated private letter from the editor to O’Connor accessed in the Gotlieb archive, Matthews reveals O’Faolain’s protest: “I take the strongest objection to printing a non-Irish writer” while herself concluding that the nub of the issue was that O’Connor’s choice “violated *The Bell*’s nationalist intentions” (50). Elsewhere she highlights how O’Faolain’s “Shadow and Substance” editorial criticised de Valera’s “romantic nationalism” while proposing in its stead “a ‘realistic nationalism’ based on the ‘actuality’ of Irish people’s daily lives” (115).

It is on such terms that we can understand the magazine’s project to create a forum for the expression of Irish identity which from the very beginning sought to give all sectors of Irish society a voice. Whether rural or urban, Southern or Northern, rich or poor, Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, *The Bell* offered a potential medium through which a new, plural national idiom could be wrought. Indeed, even the internationalism promoted in O’Faolain’s later years is most effectively invoked with a view to examining what sort of a role the Irish nation should play in the world that was emerging in the wake of World War II. Although often couched in the plainly difficult terms of a contrarian such as O’Faolain, *The Bell*’s intentions are, more than to move away from the nationalist liberation tradition, to promote a re-imagination of the ideas that had led to the imperfect independence of the Free State. Kiberd’s interpretation certainly chimes with this position and in his review he states that “*The Bell*’s call was for a completion, not a liquidation, of the anti-colonial revolution” (3).

Kiberd’s tardy endorsement of O’Faolain and *The Bell* is deserved, as are his well-chosen words of praise for Matthews’s rigorous, stimulating and well-written study. And given that in her conclusion the author chooses to indicate that the most prominent heir to the legacy of *The Bell* was the Field Day project whose broadly postcolonial critical discourse fits in with the work of Kiberd, we can trace an ideological and intellectual map which finds a space for all of these participants. That said, even though Matthews firmly situates her study as postcolonial, her engagement with that intellectual legacy is, one feels, the least convincing part of the study. She is highly original when, for example, introducing into the debate on Irish identity the ideas of the American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, but to do so while failing to address in greater depth the extensive and controversial debate around postcolonial ideas and Ireland is surprising. Certainly, the explicitly postcolonial critiques of the likes of David Lloyd, or more recently Eóin Flannery are highly relevant to a study of this nature. And given the explicit and, one feels, appropriate connection made with Field Day, perhaps a more extensive dialogue with the ideas of Seamus Deane, or indeed the key international figure to consider Ireland in postcolonial terms, Edward Said, would have added to what is, nonetheless, a very solid argument overall.

This is, however, a minor quibble. Matthews's book does brilliantly what it sets out to do and it is the standard against which any further studies of this nature will be measured. Blessed also by a very attractive design which tastefully evokes *The Bell* itself, this rewarding, subtle and hugely informative book deserves a broad public, something which one hopes the slightly prohibitive price will not frustrate.

*Alfred Markey*

### **Works Cited**

- Kiberd, Declan. "Perfect Furrow: From Poetry to Basket-weaving, from Amateur Drama to the Making of Hats: Sean O'Faolain, Francophilia and *The Bell*". *Times Literary Supplement*. 4 Jan. 2013: 3-4.
- O'Faolain, Sean. *Vive Moi!* Ed. and afterword Julia O'Faolain. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993.