

The Vanishing Ideas of Sean O’Faolain

Jerry Nolan

Marie Arndt. *A Critical Study of Sean O’Faolain’s Life and Work*. (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

My conversations with Marie Arndt about Sean O’Faolain began when we had a long interesting exchange about her forthcoming book *Sean O’Faolain’s Dilemma: Looking to the Future from the Past* at the IASIL 2000 Conference at Bath Spa University England. What attracted me to the idea of her scholarly work was the promised emphasis on the importance of O’Faolain’s non-fiction which has often tended to be undervalued, compared to the attention given to some of the graphic details from his long life as one of the prominent figures to emerge on the Irish literary scene in the wake of the Irish Literary Revival, and to critical comments on an outstanding short story writer who was not a very accomplished novelist. Now that Marie Arndt’s book has been published, I can at last focus in detail on how prominently and convincingly the non-fiction is placed and interpreted in her scholarly work. In our Bath Spa conversation, the theme of the increasing relevance of O’Faolain’s non-fiction in current Irish cultural debates promised to be revealed in the book. What surprises me greatly is the book’s virtual dismissal of O’Faolain as a thinker of substance and originality. Dr. Arndt’s concluding indictment is unequivocal: ‘His writing is too emotionally and theoretically attached to the past to be the modernising force in Irish literature and intellectual life to which he aspired. The lingering attachment which made him look in vain for an idealised past to apply to the present in order to create a better future contributed to his disillusionment with the present and his consequent inability to achieve intellectual integrity.’ (250) Two questions began to form in my mind: why has Dr. Arndt reached such a damning view of the ‘intellectual integrity’ of one of her purportedly favourite writers and how does one present the case for O’Faolain within the brief span of a review such as this?

The scholar’s main diagnosis, regularly repeated throughout the study, is that O’Faolain’s intellectual malaise arose from his failure to deal with Ireland’s ‘post-colonial experience’, which inevitably brought about his failure to balance his romantic dream of a Gaelic Ireland and his rational desire for the creation of a modern Ireland open to influences from abroad. A caricature of O’Faolain failing the scholar’s test is offered: ‘He was sitting on a seesaw, trying to balance the influences of metropolitan and subaltern cultures.’ (241) Key literary references are evoked to support the view of O’Faolain’s

chronic literary instability. There was his disastrous adoption of Coleridgean and Wordsworthian imagination: ‘Through imagination, he often described the apparently real as ideal; creative licence legitimised manipulation of fact in his non-fiction, enunciated as vacillation between imagination and reality.’ (244) Again there was his adoption of the historicism of Benedetto Croce which led him to turn Irish history and historical figures into partially manipulated fictional accounts, thereby becoming ‘an unreliable narrator, as he is writing out his own alienation and frustration.’ (245) Dr Arndt implies that the historical methodology of O’Faolain’s famous biographies of Daniel O’Connell and Hugh O’Neill stemmed from personal confusion. The process of unmasking the fatal inconsistency includes bringing on in ragged procession the ideas of John Stuart Mill, Antonio Gramsci, Clifford Gertz, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault and others, all making fleeting guest appearances in the case for the prosecution. Only in the case of *Newman’s Way*, is there a fair measure of acknowledgement of O’Faolain’s intellectual grasp of his subject; but even here there are serious reservations: ‘Private and public life are mixed in O’Faolain’s account of Newman’s long way towards his conversion, paired with narrative interference when the author enunciates parts of his own discourse rather than that of his subject.’ (156) O’Faolain’s contrast of Continental and Irish Catholicism is given a good airing with a striking interpretation of his attitudes to the two places of pilgrimage Lough Derg and Lourdes; but then is added, almost as an afterthought, the suggestion that his preference for Roman Catholicism of Italy might have a lot to do with the fact that Irish Catholicism bore ‘no resemblance to the allegedly sophisticated ways in which Italians handled their carnal affairs.’ (114) A dismissive judgement – ‘He had failed as a schoolmaster of the nation’ (94)- is handed down after O’Faolain’s resignation as editor of *The Bell* which he had founded in 1940 some ten years after the demise of AE’s *The Irish Statesman* to give a platform for writers to take stock of the intellectual, imaginative and social state of Ireland and to provide an outlet for creative writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan, Bryan MacMahon, Benedict Kiely, Mary Lavin, James Plunkett and others. This patronising dismissal utterly misses the admirable anger in O’Faolain’s ‘Signing Off’ editorial in *The Bell*: ‘I have, I confess, grown a little weary of abusing our bourgeoisie, Little Irelanders, chauvinists, puritans, stuffed-shirts, pietists, Tartuffes, Anglophobes, Celtophiles, *et alii hujus generis*...Our task has been less that of cultivating our garden than of clearing the brambles...It is one thing to have a noble vision of life to come and another to have to handle what has come.’

But the most provocative thing for me in this list of O’Faolain’s failures as a writer of non-fiction is the view of his book *The Irish* which is predictably squeezed through the established conceptual filter: ‘The book profiles major social and professional groups in Ireland from Celtic times to the present. Imagination interferes with his discourse.’ (103) I argued in a paper ‘The Irish According to O’Faolain’ presented to the Irish Literary Society London to mark the centenary of O’Faolain’s birth that *The Irish* was O’Faolain’s most remarkable work of non-fiction which can still challenge

cultural orthodoxies in Ireland. At this point I recall my analysis of *The Irish*, if only to suggest an approach to discussing O'Faolain as an Irish intellectual in terms which has to go beyond the extraordinarily restricted focus of Dr. Arndt's thesis.

When he resigned as editor of *The Bell*, O'Faolain was giving himself a breathing space to take realistic stock of his own writing career after some 15 years of a hectic literary output which included numerous articles, short stories, novels, biographies, an Abbey Theatre farce, anthologies of Irish poetry and travel books. What followed was *The Irish*, a paperback Pelican of a mere 143 pages. This little book expressed the main thrust of O'Faolain's view of Ireland's long development, in the form of an extended essay which told the story briefly, audaciously and provocatively of how a thing called Irish civilisation has been developing in a continuum, beginning in the third century B.C. and continuing in the twentieth century and beyond. Preparations for the writing the book began in March 1946 when Penguin Books invited O'Faolain to write a book about the Irish. There had just been *An Irish Journey* illustrated by Paul Henry and first published in 1940 with its vivid evocations of landscape and character, and *The Story of Ireland* illustrated by historic prints and published in 1943 with its picturesque distillation of general impressions of Irish history. The great success on *An Irish Journey* must have convinced the publishers that O'Faolain was their man for all things Irish. Before accepting the commission, O'Faolain struck a bargain with Penguin Books – £50 down and £50 on publication. His immediate instinct in his new space for thinking was to adopt the genre of *History of the French People* by Charles Seignobus which approached its subject by considering the contributions made by various races – Gascon, Fleming, Norman and others – to the formation of France as a nation. Included on the Reading List for immediate close study were Curtis's *History of Ireland*, Kenney's *Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, Tomas O'Rathaille's *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Kuno Meyer's *Ancient Irish Poetry*, Bishop Matthews's *The Celtic People and Renaissance Europe*, Estyn Evans's *The Irish Heritage*.

Reading and drafting began immediately. In *King of the Beggars* (1938) O'Faolain had explored a cultural model for developing a modern liberal democracy in Ireland. In *The Great O'Neill* (1942), the cultural message was how the Irish could draw on the resources of European civilisation to develop a national spirit. O'Faolain's intellectual contributions to *The Bell* (1940-1946) were for the most part to polemical and somewhat piecemeal reactions to current Irish affairs, whose highlight remains the record of his utterly courageous battle against the judgements of the Irish Censorship Board which was set up in 1929. In his book *The Irish*, the central theme was set as the complex nature of Irish nationality to be viewed from the standpoint of the Irish people's emergence into the mainstream of European civilisation. The book's epigraph was selected from R.G. Collingwood: 'History proper is the history of thought. There are no mere events in history.' Inspired by Collingwood's philosophical view of historiography which was expressed most cogently in Collingwood's *An Autobiography* (1939), O'Faolain's strategy was set up to uncover the long civilising process of cultural

assimilation in Ireland from the earliest known Celtic history c.300 B.C. to the historical crossroads of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921.

During the Summer of 1946 O'Faolain was visited by two young American scholars intensely interested in the Irish – Richard Ellmann and John V. Kelleher with whom he doubtless had discussions about the work in progress. O'Faolain took a summer break before applying the finishing touches – he hired a tinker's caravan drawn by a mare called Scarlet, and toured West Cork, including Gougane Barra, in the rain with his wife Eileen and two children, Julia and Stephen. O'Faolain was much amused on occasion by local reaction to his arrival – the family were often mistaken for tinkers and in Skibbereen it was rumoured that O'Faolain himself might well be the Duke of Windsor travelling incognito! Back home the much corrected ms of *The Irish* was posted off to Penguin Books. During the following year 1947, Sean O'Faolain published two books *Teresa and other stories* and *The Irish*.

My contention is that *The Irish*, for its remarkable genesis, conception and structure, stands as his most original and enduring creation. In the Author's Explanation, the outline structure was described as follows: 'In the first section, I describe the raw material of the Irish nature or genius; in the second, how intelligence begins to burgeon under stress; in the third, the five representative types which have branched from these origins – the peasantry, the Anglo-Irish, the rebels, the priests and the writers. There is a sixth type which I have barely hinted at, the new middle class, or native bourgeoisie: they are the peasant in process of development or final decay, it is too soon to say which.' O'Faolain's titles for the sections evoked the Image of the Great Tree of Ireland: Section 1 was entitled *The Roots* c.300 B.C. to c.500 A.D., pages 11 to 41; Section 2: was entitled *The Trunk* c.600 to c.1550, pages 43 to 71; Section 3 was entitled *The Five Branches* 1556 to 1922, pages 73 to 143. Before each section was a page listing the key known dates in political history, a knowing nod towards the breed of Irish historian who were most happy getting entangled in the jungle of futile and pointless raids, counter raids, battles, sieges, victories and so forth.

In Section 1 *The Roots*, the most important discussions are focused on two features of the ancient Celtic World: the Otherworld and Regional Society. On the Celtic Otherworld there was this passage: 'The Celt's sense of the Otherworld has dominated his imagination and affected his imagination from the very beginning. So I see him at any rate struggling, through century after century...seeking for a synthesis between dream and reality, aspiration and experience, a shrewd knowledge of the world and a strange reluctance to cope with it, and tending always to find the balance not in intellectual synthesis but in the rhythm of a perpetual emotional oscillation.' (Perhaps these remarks about the Celts are at the bottom of Dr. Arndt's view of O'Faolain's dilemma?) O'Faolain concluded from his readings that the Celts never formulated a religion beyond the animistic stage of belief and that the dualism between dream and reality has persisted in the Christian era: 'There may be an overlay of stern Christian morality. At bottom there is a joyous pagan amorality.' O'Faolain found a kind of imaginative synthesis in pre-

tenth-century lyrics and the Ossianic tales and poems, achieved only on the personal levels of the individual poets, so that he concluded that ‘the heart-beat of genius seems to be the best interpreter of the race.’ On the vexed question of the precise nature of Celtic Society, O’Faolain wrote this; ‘In three words it was aristocratic, regional and personal, and all three to an extreme degree... This indifference to political unity is a very different matter to the Celts’ powerful, racial, linguistic, and sentimental sense of oneness... combining this strong sense of their racial oneness with the equally strong insistence on their regional otherness; which seems to have nourished that fatal delusion that to flourish as a people, it was not necessary to formulate the political concept of the nation.’ O’Faolain asserted that the Irish happily fulfilled their genius by means of dispersion and disconnection up to the point when the Danes and the Normans brought into Ireland the three changes – ports, roads and towns – which all peoples on the island could not simply ignore. But O’Faolain also happily asserted that just as the old Celtic paganism was never tamed by Christianity, so the Celtic gift of atavistic individualism survived Normanisation in the still surviving impulse in the Irish to obey no laws at all!

In Section 2 *The Trunk*, O’Faolain interpreted two features which dominated Ireland’s emergence from the Celtic Past: Irish Monasticism and the Norman Gift. According to O’Faolain, Irish monasteries were outside the direction of an organised church from the 6th to the 12th centuries. The popularity of the monastic vocation in Ireland, he suggested, was linked to the opportunity afforded for a heroic and extravagant way of life for Irishmen – ‘pointless peregrinations and penances... true evangelisation... valuable secular learning’ – which led many Irish monks to found monasteries throughout Europe: in Brueil, Ratisbon, Wurzburg, Nuremberg, Constance and Vienna. O’Faolain found an image to convey the tension between devotion and adventure within the Irish monk visible in the designs to be found in the *Book of Kells*: ‘each example so intricate, so devotedly pursued – one can hardly say constructed – in its own personal waywardness, so magnificent, delicate, lonely, convoluted, spontaneous, so circuitous and unpredictable that it might be taken as an image of the individualistic genius at its most colourful and most tantalising.’ Then the Norman invaded and established an episcopal system, cathedral centres and provinces. ‘The corporate system thus enters... on the regional scene not through politics but through religion and invasion.’ O’Faolain dubbed the Norman invasion of Ireland as the ‘Norman Gift’ because the Normans started civic life in the country. O’Faolain cited the county of Kilkenny as one of the best examples of Norman civilisation, pointing to the busy River Barrow region where a great Cistercian Abbey once stood and the city of Kilkenny with its 12th century cathedral and other Norman remains: ‘It was the Normans who first introduced the Irish to politics. They were our first Home Rulers. They did not think of Ireland as a nation... but they stood as sturdily for their religion and their land, as in the 19th century, an O’Connell for the one and a Davitt for the other; by which time, of course, Norman and Irish were completely commingled.’ Later, O’Faolain asserted, in connection with the defeat of the Great O’Neill at Kinsale in 1601: ‘Only one positive and creative thing

came out of the last wreck of Gaeldom: Ulster as we know it' and then quoted from Curtis's *History of Ireland*: 'It was not until after 1660 that the Scottish element in Ulster became a pronounced success and it is the only case of a real, democratic, industrial and labouring colony established in Ireland.' O'Faolain revelled in finding historical precedents for a mixture of diverse strains and fertile cross-breedings in that continuum of the slowly evolving Irish: 'We will have to agree that too many strains and influences have have been woven into the tapestry of the Irish Mind for anybody to disentangle them.' Such a cultural ideal for Ireland recalls AE's advocacy of the need for the fusion of diverse elements in his work *The National Being* published in 1916, in which AE dealt in characteristic fashion with the theme of being Irish.

In Section 3 *The Branches*, O'Faolain presented examples of Irish people from the sixteenth century onwards, with the emphasis on strongly defined individual sharing a common identity. Predictably there was praise of O'Connell for the political feat of turning the Irish tenant peasant, which the old bardic aristocratic mind satirised so furiously and understandably, into the recognisable beginnings of modern Irish democracy. There was great acclaim of Wolfe Tone, too, whose autobiography he had edited in the 1930s. O'Faolain praised Tone for his cosmopolitanism, in sharp contrast to Pearse's praise of Tone for his revolutionary nationalism. O'Faolain wrote of Tone: 'This young Protestant Dubliner, educated at Trinity College, that alien nursery of native causes, was to unite the logic of the Northern Scot to the passions of the Southern Irish, to scatter the timidities of the peasants and the vacillations of the tradesmen with his vision of the new revolutionary age...A century before and the fumes of a thousand years were still lingering about us. Almost without warning Wolfe Tone flings open the doors of the modern world like a thunder-clap. Nothing less dramatic can describe a change so great as to see Jacobin ideas spreading, at whatever simplified remove from their original form, among a Gaelic-speaking peasantry.' Tone and O'Connell were not opposites in O'Faolain's reading of the rhythm of Irish history but belonged to that continuum of Irish experience which has been developed and sustained by European enlightenment.

In the closing pages of *The Irish*, O'Faolain permitted himself the flourish of a final caricature in the memorable yet little remembered comparison between a nationalist like De Valera and Thomas Mann's character Aschenbach in the novella *Death in Venice*. 'Our Nationalism has been our Egoism. It was our lovely, shining youth. Like all the appurtenances of youth it was lovely in its day. After its day, to attempt to wear it is a form of Death in Venice, a middle aged man raddling his cheeks to keep his youthful glow in times of plague. Ireland has clung to her youth, indeed her childhood, longer and more tenaciously than any other country in Europe, resisting change, Alteration, Reconstruction to the very last.'

When *The Irish* was published, the central concept of the book was utterly removed from the immediate concerns of Irish politicians of all parties, and even more remote from the terms of references then being used by the academic historians. For

O’Faolain, the historian should never be regarded as the recording agent outside of, or even above, his material. O’Faolain was taking his cue from Collingwood, Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in the University of Oxford, when he pondered on the meaning and direction of Irish history and fixed his penetrating gaze, not on the conventional quest of what Ireland had lost during successive invasions but on what the Irish had gained by way of civilisation from the sequence of settler peoples. When *The Irish* was reissued over twenty years later, O’Faolain added a sixth branch to the Third Section Branches entitled Politicians, thereby acknowledging the need for the political initiative, if a new mass movement were ever to unite the varieties of Irishry. There were favourable references to the successors of DeValera, Sean Lemass and Jack Lynch for new directions in the policies of nation-building

In 1947 Graham Greene invited O’Faolain to go to Italy to write a travel book. When he was reassured that Eyre & Spottiswoode would cover all expenses and pay an advance of £500, O’Faolain accepted. It was the beginning of many travels, and a new way of life. Suddenly the cosmopolitan European writer replaced the unwanted Irish intellectual. From 1947 onwards, O’Faolain wrote less about Ireland, even though he continued to write short stories which analysed the Irish, at home and abroad, with irony and sympathy. Occasionally he responded vigorously in *The Bell* to contemporary controversies, as in the case of Dr. Noel Browne’s Mother and Child Bill in 1951. After the Eyre & Spottiswoode, commission, there came the offer of a commission from Longmans to write a life of Cardinal Newman on the basis of an advance of £1000. Between 1949 and 1953, O’Faolain published *A Summer in Italy*, *Newman’s Way* and *South to Sicily*. The book *The Irish*, then, did not prove to be a new Irish beginning for its author. Today it seems like a brilliant literary meteor which streaked across Irish skies before vanishing beyond contemporary horizons. O’Faolain claimed to have found Roman Catholicism in Italy and the way in which he explored the conversion of the young John Henry Newman to Rome in the 1840s showed how well he understood the multiple levels of Newman’s conversion experience. In some ways, O’Faolain’s path to Italy suggests a parallel to the flight of the Great O’Neill when the Earl fled after the defeat of his European project in Ireland; but there was also the path to the USA, first undertaken on a Commonwealth Fund Scholarship to study at Harvard University in 1926 and later in 1959 when O’Faolain the fleeing Director of the Irish Arts Council, O’Faolain accepted the irresistible offer to lecture at Princeton University. The lucrative path to American Academia effectively distanced him from the Ireland of the 1960s where economic developments followed the T.K. Whitaker Report (1958) and religious developments occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962 onwards).

In 1979 – almost 40 years after his previously published novel – O’Faolain published his last novel *And Again?* The central character was Robert Younger who began to live his life backwards from the age of sixty five – only to find lost loves, missing memories and old mistakes as he younged it back through middle-age, youth and childhood ever helped throughout by the woman who as lover, wife and mother

helped him somehow to link up his beginning and his ending. This final *tour de force* was of O'Faolain's retirement into a more restful world of fantasy, comedy and pathos where the old man could amuse himself by parodying the process of searching in the past to take possession of the present and to control the future which had been the very mental process at the conceptual core of *The Irish*. His party political isolation at the time of his death was glaringly exposed by the total absence of members of the Oireachtas from his Memorial Mass at St. Joseph's Church, Glasthule on the 4 May 1991, during the very year when Dublin was the Cultural Capital of Europe. Conor Cruise O'Brien, who gave the address at the Memorial Mass, was much angered by the conspicuous absence and wrote in *The Irish Independent* shortly afterwards: 'If a writer of comparable distinction, belonging to any other nation, were being commemorated in the national capital, the Memorial Service would have been crowned with representatives of the nation's entire establishment.' Doubtless the Sixth Branch of Politicians saw nothing of national importance in O'Faolain's achievements, even as the era of Mary Robinson's Presidency began to unfold to the acclaim of the liberal Irish media. The absence would not have surprised O'Faolain-one of his final reflections in *The Irish* was about the development of the national mind when he remarked on 'the slowness of the process, especially when, as in Ireland, isolation has ossified mental habits over a long period and unrest has subsequently made gradual and natural development and construction impossible.'

Professor J.J. Lee from University College Cork, author of *Ireland 1912-1985*, has written about *The Irish*: 'The full fruits of the seeds O'Faolain scattered so prodigally remain to be harvested...*The Irish* will remain central to our understanding of ourselves as long as we care about history.' As an outstanding academic historian himself, Professor Lee found much to praise in O'Faolain's approach towards a philosophy of Irish history. What strikes me most about *The Irish* is that it was essentially an eloquent plea for the continuation of Ireland's long evolution. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in the Memorial Address, that the three voices of creative dissent in modern Ireland had been: 'Owen Sheehy Skeffington, Hubert Butler and Sean O'Faolain: an agnostic, a Protestant and a Catholic.' (*The Cork Review* 1991 – O'Faolain Memorial Issue) O'Faolain's contribution by way of *The Irish* will remain centrally relevantly as long as there is genuine cultural debate in Ireland. In 1971 O'Faolain was involved in a TV series of programmes, made by Niall McCarthy, under the general title 'We.The Irish': he added further branches to the Irish Tree in three TV programmes 'Saints and Soldiers', 'The Money Men' and 'The Exiles'. In 2002, the major question for the Irish concerns the democratic need for a broad cultural basis for an United Ireland which is confidently open to multi-cultural influences in a globalised world. In the current state of public opinion, there is often a level of debate reminiscent of that which O'Faolain struggled against in the 1930s and 1940s. Here is O'Faolain's summative opinion of the Irish today in the closing sentences of the little book in its 1969 edition: 'I fear that for Ireland much of our history is made of endurances, so that for us moderns to make any meaningful historical synthesis out

of our past, to abstract the basic lessons from our experience, is particularly difficult. However we have achieved one lesson. If, in the long view of history we Irish have thus far learned little, and that slowly, from our actions and our passions, we have at least begun to learn how to learn. We will, painfully, learn more. How beautiful, as Chekhov used to say of his Russia, life in Ireland will be in two hundred years' time!

I conducted a Focus Interview with Dr. Arndt about O'Faolain, published in the *British Association for Irish Studies Newsletter* (April 2001). My last question was: 'How relevant do you consider O'Faolain's writings in the great cultural debates of the early twenty-first century?' Her reply included a reference to O'Faolain's 'schizophrenic identity' which, she supposed, had originally stemmed from the self-created tensions arising from his desire to embrace both the Gaelic past and modern internationalism. Clearly such a fixed view of O'Faolain's unresolved dilemma underlies her interpretation of his entire *oeuvre* of non-fiction. In the case of *The Irish*, I find no evidence of any such self-created dilemma, nor do I detect any intimations of forms of 'schizophrenia'. What I do find throughout O'Faolain's non-fiction is much evidence of an Irish *dissident's* intellectual and imaginative drive towards preparing the common ground for a cultural commingling of all the traditions on the island of Ireland, a quest which first clearly surfaced in his use of the biographical genre in *King of the Beggars* and *The Great O'Neill*. Neither do I find very credible the case for carving up the writer into John Whelan and Sean O'Faolain whose unresolved conflicts are supposed to make him 'the contradictory writer without whom twentieth-century literary and intellectual would have been at a loss.' (250) What a pity that so many of O'Faolain's challenging ideas about Ireland's past, present and future have vanished from this study – that is indeed a loss!