Peadar O'Donnell, 'Real Republicanism' and *The Bell*

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IF THERE is any truth universally acknowledged in Irish cultural debate, it is the central importance of *The Bell* in the cultural history of twentieth-century Ireland. Published in 131 numbers over a span of fourteen years (1940–54), *The Bell* was less a literary magazine than a broad cultural review: a stimulating forum for creative writing, sophisticated criticism of literature and the arts, documentary social observation, and informed, reflective commentary. It was a nursery for an entire generation of Irish writers and critics: Patrick Kavanagh, Brendan Behan, James Plunkett, John Montague, Vivian Mercier, Conor Cruise O'Brien (under the nom-de-plume 'Donat O'Donnell') and Anthony Cronin were among the talents nurtured on its pages, many of their early, if not their first, published works appearing within its covers. More established writers such as Frank O'Connor, Francis Stuart, Denis Johnston, Elizabeth Bowen, Hubert Butler, Lennox Robinson, John Hewitt and Flann O'Brien also found in *The Bell* a welcoming and congenial haven.

The Bell is generally interpreted in literary and cultural criticism as having sounded the first peals of revisionism, the range and tenor of its discourse represented as among the first attempts to revise the official ideology of the youthful Irish state. At a time when the Irish cultural landscape was at its most barren, cloistered and introverted nadir, delineated by clichéd Gaelic revivalism, nationalist pieties, clerical triumphalism and an aggressive censorship, *The Bell* espoused alternative values that were urbane, liberal and modernising. Critics, thus, have situated it within a tradition of humane dissent against the social and cultural mores of the young Irish state that began with the *Irish Statesman* of the 1920s, a tradition it would bequeath to later generations who were able to transform such marginalised dissent into actual social change. *The Bell*, then, is represented as a prophetic voice in the philistine nationalist wilderness, preparing the way for the liberal agenda.

What is usually overlooked in such analysis—or, if observed, left unanalysed—is the fact that the two persons most intimately involved in the founding and subsequent progress of *The Bell* were both anti-treaty

republicans. Sean O'Faolain (1900–91), editor of the journal over its first six years and thereafter a steady contributor, had been an IRA director of publicity during the civil war and through a subsequent career as an academic and professional writer had retained an interest in the historical relationship between political issues and questions of cultural import. Peadar O'Donnell (1893–1986), managing editor under O'Faolain and then editor for the remainder of the journal's lifespan, had pursued a longer and more prominent career within the republican movement, sitting on the army council of the IRA till 1933, the year before he launched the socialist republican movement Republican Congress. Since the values and ethos of Irish republicanism are usually presumed to be antithetical to the revisionist project, it would seem most paradoxical that the two leading principals in *The Bell*'s history emerged from republican backgrounds. This article will examine the relationship between the editorial policy of *The Bell* and the character of discourse that it stimulated on the one hand, and republican ideology and ethos on the other. Did *The Bell* represent a break, witting or unwitting, with its founders' republican pasts, or did it represent a continuity?

Real republicanism

The Bell originated with Peadar O'Donnell. For some twenty years, according to one of his biographers, O'Donnell had nursed the idea of a 'really high-class monthly' linked to the republican movement. Then, one day in the summer of 1940, he strode purposefully up to O'Faolain in a Dublin street 'like a policeman' and asked him to edit the new magazine he was contemplating.[1] Why was it at that particular moment in Irish history and in his own career that O'Donnell determined that the time had come to realise his long-held idea? And what was the ideological perspective that he brought to the project?

Having come to republicanism from the trade-union movement, O'Donnell was by 1940 the leading figure on the Irish left. In the autumn of 1918, he had given up a post as a national school teacher in his native Donegal (he had been a militant activist in the teachers' union) to become a full-time organiser with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). The following spring, while remaining for the time with the ITGWU, he also joined the IRA, going on to lead a flying column and become a brigade commandant in the troubles of 1920–21. He served in the anti-treaty Four Courts garrison, was arrested on its surrender and spent the rest of the civil war in Free State prisons. Prominent in the IRA leadership throughout the decade after 1924, he strived continually to nudge the republican movement into a leftist ideology and to wean the

IRA away from its primarily militarist strategy to active engagement in political and social activity on 'concrete issues'. Even the sacred cow of abstentionism was subjected to scrutiny, though with the activist's proviso: 'I had no patience with Sinn Féin hesitations to tramp through Leinster House on the way to the Republic. Equally, I had no time for parliamentary agitation not linked with field work'.[2] From 1925 to 1932, in the foremost of his 'field work' agitations, he spearheaded the grassroots campaign to withhold payment of land purchase annuities.

Never a left-wing sectarian or republican factionalist, O'Donnell regarded with interest the emergence of Fianna Fáil. Eyeing the party's populist base among small farmers and urban workers (the very constituency at which he aimed his own appeals), he detected within the party a latent radicalism with which he could ally. He drew Fianna Fáil militants into active involvement in the land annuities agitation, and in the 1932 general election he went so far as to endorse de Valera's party in the IRA newspaper *An Phoblacht*, of which he was editor, under the slogan 'Put Cosgrave Out!', and encouraged IRA volunteers to canvass for Fianna Fáil candidates. With Fianna Fáil in power, he strategised, pressure from a socially radical and agitating IRA on its left flank would unleash that party's latent radicalism and propel it—with or without de Valera at the helm—into radical social reconstruction. Disillusionment was rapid. The IRA leadership, wary as ever of contamination by 'politics', declined to exert the requisite pressure, and de Valera was thus allowed to reveal his own economically conservative colours, encouraging the growth of small-scale native capitalism behind protectionist trade barriers and shunning the radical land reform and redistribution that O'Donnell urged as fundamental to social transformation in the Irish context. In 1934—in defiance of IRA policy and resulting in his expulsion from the army—O'Donnell launched the Republican Congress, conceived as a popular front of republicans, socialists and trade unionists and hoping to attract the more radically populist elements within Fianna Fáil. Enacting quite literally the adage about the first item on the agenda of every new Irish political organisation being the split, Republican Congress divided at its first national conference between those who wished to launch a new socialist political party seeking as an immediate objective a 'workers' republic' and those who, following O'Donnell, wished the new venture to remain what it was: a congress, a coming together of all republican opinion representing disparate organisations, to pursue the common objective of 'the republic'. Terminally enervated by the split, for a few years the tiny body sputtered through sporadic agitations on various local issues, including tenants' rents and industrial strikes. By 1937 the

Congress was little more than a name kept alive by O'Donnell and a handful of colleagues as a tag for their activities and polemics.

There were, then, by the late 1930s, three strains of self-styled Irish republicanism, each claiming to be the authentic embodiment of the republican tradition and all competing for leadership of republican Ireland. By far the most dominant was the Fianna Fáil strain, moderate in policy and populist in appeal, but bourgeois driven and led, latterly travelling the constitutional road; there was also the IRA strain of physical-force and abstentionist republicanism; and there was O'Donnell's strain of social republicanism, concentrating on militant direct action on social issues. O'Donnell and his Republican Congress colleagues accused their competitors of not being 'real' or 'genuine' in their republicanism; O'Donnell said of de Valera that he only pretended to be a republican, that he was not 'a real Republican'.[3]

What did O'Donnell mean by so asserting that he was espousing 'real republicanism', while the competing strains—and Fianna Fáil especially—were ersatz in their republicanism? The assertion involves various connotations. He insisted that his republicanism was 'real' in its fundamental identification of radical social reform based on a movement of 'workers and working farmers' with the very idea of the republic. This identification had two dimensions, one strategic, the other ideological. The strategic dimension rested on the insistence that the natural constituency of the republican movement would always be found among the lower classes, 'the men of no property', and that to secure their active involvement in the struggle the movement must promote comprehensive social reform, even social revolution. Every other social class had an interest in maintaining certain aspects of the status quo, a 'stake in the country', and, hence, could realise its aspirations within some accommodation with British imperialism short of sovereign republican independence. The ideological dimension involved the conviction that implicit in the republican idea were the principles of social egalitarianism and radical democracy. Fundamental to republicanism as a political philosophy is the concept that legitimate political sovereignty resides with the people of the nation. However, this principle of popular sovereignty is a meaningless formula unless the people of the nation—each and every one of them—possess authentic political power and thereby govern themselves. And such a principle of popular rule cannot be realised if society is dominated by privileged elites of property, wealth or social position. Thus, implicit in the republican idea is a levelling political and social egalitarianism. In modern industrial society, the republican principle of popular sovereignty can be authentically realised only under a socialist

ordering of the economy. James Connolly described the republic as the point of departure for the socialist. To O'Donnell, socialism was the logical destination of the republican. Throughout the various political agitations of his career, the vehicle for this ideology was O'Donnell's emphasis on galvanising public engagement in practical politics at grassroots level: the land annuities campaign was founded on a myriad of local committees, federated into a national umbrella body; Republican Congress was organised around similar local branches. In the spirit of his early ITGWU syndicalism, O'Donnell predicted that these decentralised, democratically controlled 'organs of struggle' would become the 'organs of government'.[4] Finally, O'Donnell situated this 'real republicanism' within a tradition of theory and praxis originating with Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, continuing through the agrarian radicalism of Fintan Lalor and the democratic republicanism of the early Fenians, and then to Michael Davitt and such later figures as Connolly and Liam Mellows.

But O'Donnell's real republicanism embraced other principles besides a socialist consciousness. A succinct expression of the wider scope of its concepts, containing within it the seeds of *The Bell*, may be found in the terms of the debate in which O'Donnell and his left republican associates engaged in response to the proposed enactment in 1937 of the new Irish constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, sponsored by the Fianna Fáil government. Not only a demarcation of the national territory and an outline of the institutions of the state, the constitution was also a statement of the fundamental political principles and social values meant to guide the Irish nation and, as such, a definitive codification of the de Valerean dispensation. In campaigning against its ratification by popular referendum, the left republicans formulated arguments that amounted to an outline of the fundamental principles and values underlying their alternative concept of the nation. The left republican argument was contained in the *Irish Democrat*, a short-lived but lively weekly newspaper co-sponsored by Republican Congress, other leftist organisations and progressive-minded individuals.[5] A series of articles analysing the constitution and attacking its terms appeared over three issues of the *Democrat* in May 1937, as the draft constitution was being debated in the Dáil.[6] The series culminated in a Republican Congress manifesto on the constitution, published in the 22 May number over the names of O'Donnell, as Congress chairman, and Frank Ryan (editor of the *Democrat* while on a three-month invalided home-stay from the Spanish civil war) as honorary secretary. In common with the broadsides against the constitution in the earlier issues of the *Democrat*, the manifesto did not base its argument solely, or even principally, on the failure of the

constitution to declare an Irish republic, nor on its accommodation to the fact of partition. Rather, the argument concentrated on three issues of social import raised by the section of the constitution dealing with 'fundamental rights'. The first of these was the provision of Article 43 on property rights that declared 'the private ownership of external goods' to be a 'natural right, antecedent to positive law' and guaranteed that the Irish state would not seek to abolish the rights of private ownership and conveyance of property. The Congress manifesto responded by charging that 'private property is raised here almost to the dignity of a sacrament'. True to the spirit of the 1930s and to the socialism that was the key identifying feature of their brand of republicanism, it was this topic that had dominated the earlier issues of the *Democrat* debate, in terms likewise redolent of religious imagery. One article, in the 8 May issue, tersely summarised the import of the draft constitution under the heading 'No Republic, No King—But Capital!' and condemned the constitutional declaration of the capitalist system:

> … as something ordained by Providence for ever, amen! Private property is declared sacred—a 'natural right' overriding all law. What does this mean if not that the despoiled and dispossessed masses, without property … are forever to remain despoiled and dispossessed … Poverty is sacred; having no property is sacred; wage slavery is sacred; the Poor Law is sacred.

Another *Democrat* article of the same date asserted that 'present property relations' were being given constitutional guarantee as natural human rights, and 'thus the capitalist system is in effect declared eternal'.

The second issue was the recognition accorded in Article 44 to the 'special position' of the Roman Catholic Church. In rejecting this provision, the manifesto proclaimed that republicans 'take their stand on the principle of equality before the state of all citizens, irrespective of religious belief … [and] are opposed to a State or a semi-State church'. Having made this assertion of general republican principle, the manifesto then stressed the difficulties that the article on religion would pose to the realisation of a particular Irish republican aspiration: the cessation of partition and reunification of the nation. In the Dáil debate, both de Valera and Sean T. O'Kelly had described the constitution as appropriate to 'a catholic nation', while envisioning that no fundamental change in the constitution would be required when national reunification was accomplished; the protestants of the north, as those of the south, would thus be expected to abide within the constitutional framework of 'a catholic nation'.[7]

The third issue addressed by the manifesto was the implications for the

status of women of the provisions on the family enshrined in Article 41. Objecting to the regression from 'the guarantee to women of equal rights and equal opportunities stated so clearly in the 1916 Proclamation', the manifesto demanded 'that it be openly declared in any constitution for the Irish Republic that equal pay and opportunities for women in industry shall be assured'. This affirmed the more trenchant observations made in the *Democrat* of 8 May by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington ('Feminist Leader Flays Constitution: Even Worse Than Cosgrave's'), who surveyed the steady erosion of the legal and practical status of women since the establishment of the Free State, concluding that these 'inequalities' were now being given constitutional sanction, with 'the implication that God sanctioned them too'. An accompanying unsigned synopsis of the provisions of the constitution that described how 'one half of the nation's citizens … are proscribed as having but one function—to keep house' spoke of 'this stone-age conception of womanhood', concluding tersely that the 'right of divorce is prohibited'.

In a 1945 *Bell* editorial, Sean O'Faolain posited that the republican rebels of the civil war—citing himself as a prime exemplar—'had no concept of the state we wished to found'.[8] Whatever about the general validity of this observation to 1922, it certainly seems that by 1937 the social republicans writing in the *Irish Democrat* had a quite clear concept of the type of nation that they were espousing. It was to be socialist, secular and feminist: a democratic and egalitarian republic.[9] On the three key issues identified in the Congress manifesto, the positions taken by O'Donnell and his left republican comrades foreshadowed the ethos of *The Bell*. While by no means specifically socialist, *The Bell* was socially conscious, alerting its readers to conditions among the urban and rural poor and raising related issues of social injustice. It was especially noted for its brave denunciation of the clerical domination of Irish political, social and cultural life, and its broad sense of social equality and inclusiveness embraced the contemporary concerns of feminists regarding the status of women. Furthermore, regarding the latter two of these issues—the religious question and women's rights—the *Irish Democrat*, three years before the launch of *The Bell*, was raising social and constitutional concerns that would become central points of the latter-day 'liberal agenda', resulting in eventual amendment of the very terms of the constitution to which the *Democrat* had objected: the special position of the Roman church and the article on the family that prohibited the dissolution of marriage. The 1937 left republicans, standing on the grounds of fundamental republican principle, thus foreshadowed the 'pluralist society' pursued by later generations of Irish liberals on some of

its most contentious and representative features.

The enactment of the 1937 constitution was one of a series of events in the late 1930s that seem to have persuaded O'Donnell of the collapse of the political strategy he had been pursuing since the end of the civil war and of the marginalisation on the political spectrum of his strain of social republicanism. The first of these events was the early split and rapid demise of Republican Congress, intended, as it was, as the organisational vehicle for his strategy and ideology. The second was the fierce and febrile debate aroused in Ireland by the Spanish civil war: ferociously vilified by right-wing clergy, politicians and press over his outspoken support for the Spanish republic, O'Donnell became a hate figure to a substantial chunk of the Irish populace, caricatured as an irreligious, priest-hating, church-burning red. The third of these events, the enactment of the constitution, was deeply symbolic of the clear dominance and likely entrenchment of the de Valerean strain of republican ideology, which to O'Donnell was a betrayal of republican principle and the true republican tradition. The fourth event was the turn taken by the third strain of Irish republicanism, the physical-force movement, which also had a constitutional form. A newly installed IRA leadership under Sean Russell expunged from army policy any remaining vestige of leftist leaning or dabbling in politics and embarked on an exclusively (and highly aggressive) militarist strategy. Just prior to the start of the 1939 IRA bombing campaign in British cities (described privately by O'Donnell as 'brainless'), a transfer was declared of recognition as the legitimate government of the Irish republic from the republican members of the second Dáil to the army council of the IRA, which then proceeded to declare its war on Britain.

The Republican Congress manifesto on the constitution had boldly called for a redeclaration of the republic by the people of Ireland in defiance of the Fianna Fáil regime and outlined the kind of republic it wished to see declared. The other two competing strains of republicanism had also played their hands and had done so in constitutional terms. Bourgeois-led republicanism, while still brandishing the republican label, had promulgated a constitution that failed either in name or in substance to declare the republic, but, rather, openly purported to be a constitution for a 'catholic nation'. Physical-force republicanism *had* redeclared the republic, but without a social programme or political strategy and to the desperate din of bombs. Such was the historical context in which, in the summer of 1940, O'Donnell approached O'Faolain with his idea for a broad political, social and cultural review. It must have been clear to O'Donnell that the constituency for his strain of republican ideology—

never overwhelming in fact, however so he had regarded it in potential—had all but vanished: it was minute and marginal. Ever the incurable optimist (to a degree that often exasperated his friends and colleagues), ever faithful to the ultimate victory of 'the people', what O'Donnell determined upon in the bleak political circumstances of 1940 was not an abandonment of the struggle, but a new departure, a renewal of the struggle on a field of battle more appropriate to the circumstances. Over the years of his political activism, he had also emerged as a figure on the Irish cultural landscape; in addition to his journalism, he had written five novels and two volumes of autobiographical documentary. Now, he determined to shift his primary concentration from political agitation to cultural activity. Surveying the terms of the 1937 constitution and the course of the 1939 IRA bombing campaign, it must have seemed to O'Donnell that the republic—his idea of the republic—had not been achieved because it had been misunderstood. Before the republic could be redeclared, the idea of the republic had to be reclaimed from the other two strains of republican ideology and action. In order for the republic to be reclaimed, it had first to be re-explained and redefined. This could be attempted, not via yet another political organisation or initiative, but via a concerted effort on the field of discourse. Through such a discursive process of redefinition and re-explication, a new constituency for O'Donnell's idea of the republic might be shaped.

The nation and the republic

Various scholarly enquiries into the nature and history of nationalism have tended to identify two fundamental variants of the phenomenon, distinguished primarily by the manner in which they define 'the people' who constitute the nation.[10] One variant arises from a political definition of the nation as essentially a body politic that expresses its collective will as to the mode in which it wishes to be governed. The other variant conceives of the nation as essentially a cultural community that expresses its collective choice to govern itself apart from other such communities. These two fundamental variants can be designated as *political nationalism* and *cultural nationalism*, provided that it is clear that what is meant by these terms is not an opposition between nationalism expressed as a political movement and nationalism as expressed in 'cultural' production (literature, music, art, etc.). Rather, the terms are meant to designate two variant structures of nationalist thought and feeling, one defining the nation in political terms, the other in cultural terms. Both variants of nationalism can find expression in cultural production—indeed, the subject of this discussion is the genesis and character of one such

article of cultural production, *The Bell*.

Following from their fundamental definitions of the nation, the two variant forms of nationalism may be further described as having distinct sets of characteristics. Political nationalism emphasises definition of the civic space, the arena in which power is exercised and political decisions rendered. Addressing the individual as a functioning member of the body politic, it concerns itself with definition of the individual's rights and responsibilities as citizen of a self-governing nation state; in a word, with the individual as *citoyen*. In cultural nationalism the emphasis is on definition of the character of the cultural community, on examination and celebration of the cultural characteristics that render the community unique and distinct from other communities. Of prime concern are the innate characteristics of the individual as member of an organic community, a *volk*, distinguishable from other such *volks* by the unique cultural attributes that each individual in the community shares. Political nationalism tends toward what Maurice Goldring calls an 'open' concept of citizenship, one that includes among the people of the nation every individual born or resident within the national territory, without reference to other defining characteristics. Cultural nationalism tends toward what Goldring calls a 'closed' citizenship, in which membership of the nation is restricted to those individuals possessing the specified set of essentialist characteristics that defines the national community: usually some combination of language, ethnicity, religion, and race.

Rooted intellectually in the rationalism of the eighteenth-century enlightenment and engendered in opposition to the political and ecclesiastical institutions and hereditary class distinctions of the *anciens régimes* that it usurped, political nationalism is secular, sceptical, anti-monarchic and anti-aristocratic. Its ethos embodies the enlightenment emphasis on social organisation, public affairs and civic-mindedness. Cultural nationalism, tracing its intellectual origins to nineteenth-century German romanticism, tends to a mythic irrationalism in its emphasis on the locus of individual identity in mystical union with the soul of the larger community. Cultural nationalism concentrates on definition of the composition and character of the nation, demarcation of the national territory, and assertion of the nation's right to cultural and political autonomy; the precise manner in which the nation is to be governed is of secondary and contingent interest. A national monarchy and a particular religious confession may both be regarded as portions of the nation's cultural heritage, essential links with the nation's past; the latter may be regarded as a badge of national identity. In its exploration of cultural uniqueness, cultural nationalism concerns itself deeply with language,

folklore and historical continuity with the nation's past; the peasantry, deemed uncontaminated by contact with alien cultures, is idealised as reservoir of the authentic national character. Language is a subject of paramount interest, for, akin to religion, it combines a communal function with a profound expression and penetration of the individual psyche. Culture, in the sense of cultural product, is approached by the cultural nationalist for its value as an expression of the national character; art is expressive, emotive, and comes from the heart. To the political nationalist, culture is primarily a medium for communication between rational beings, a medium for the exchange of ideas; art proceeds from the head, and is a stimulus of thought.

At the core of political nationalism, then, is the principle of *popular sovereignty*, of the right of *the* people (the citizens) to govern themselves. At the core of cultural nationalism is the principle of *national self-determination*, of the right of *a* people (the *volk*) to govern itself. John Hutchinson, in a meticulous (if in places overly categorical) study, has discussed the complex relationship between a political and a cultural variant of nationalism within Ireland since the late eighteenth century. He argues that the prevalent ideology of the 1916 revolutionaries, which they bequeathed to both the founders of the Irish Free State and their anti-treaty opponents, was a form of cultural nationalism rooted in the Gaelic revival of the late nineteenth century; enunciated by figures of the catholic bourgeois intelligentsia, this revival looked to the 'golden age' of medieval Christianity for the origins of the Irish nation as a unique cultural community. While Hutchinson's contribution is impressive and has provided the basis for much of the above delineation of the two variants of nationalism as structures of ideology and feeling, he affords, I believe, inadequate attention to the ideology of Irish republicanism and its place in the historic dynamic. He also tends to equate Irish political nationalism too easily with constitutional political movements and personages, and Irish cultural nationalism, in its 'socio-political articulation', with the tradition of physical-force separatism. As a modification of his model, I propose a designation of republicanism, in Ireland and elsewhere, as a species of political nationalism—as, indeed, the generative species of political nationalism as a political movement, in that the first modern nation states founded by political nationalists, in the Americas and in France, defined themselves as republics.[11] Republicanism entered Ireland in the late eighteenth century under the direct influence of those American and French examples. However, throughout the nineteenth century, and especially in its final decade, the ideology of the Irish republican movement was indeed infiltrated by concepts more appropriate to cultural

nationalism. Through such organisations as the Gaelic League and the GAA, the IRB generation of the 1890s, the incubator of the future direction of the movement, was deeply influenced by the ideas and values of a 'Gaelicist' cultural nationalism, to the extent that the prevalent ideology of the movement did veer away from a political to a cultural concept of what constituted the Irish nation. The descriptive term 'republican' became more a designation of the aspiration to total separation from Britain and its empire than a set of ideas and values describing a 'republican' definition of how the nation should be defined, governed and constituted. This process probably happened because of the wide currency of cultural nationalism in that era as an all but essential ingredient of the spirit of the age, not only in Ireland but also throughout Europe and beyond. Even within traditions formerly identifiable as politically nationalist, there was a compulsion to fortify the nation's claims to a separate national identity and a self-governing nation state with assertions of historic cultural distinctiveness, where, before, political arguments for self-government had sufficed. This was a complicated process, and for most individuals the structure of ideology and feeling would have been a complex amalgam of political and cultural ideas and notions, in a fluid blend that could change in emphasis for each individual throughout his or her life. Nonetheless, from the 1890s, the prevalent ideology among extra-constitutional Irish separatists, including those who described themselves as republican, did become a Gaelicist cultural nationalism. This ideology remained dominant in the nominally republican Sinn Féin party that emerged from the October 1917 Ard-Fheis. When that party split in 1922, its pro-treaty element proceeded to shape the ethos of their new state in accord with this Gaelicist cultural nationalism, now become the official state ideology. After 1932, de Valera's Fianna Fáil, likewise heirs to the post-1890 IRB, affirmed the values of Gaelicist cultural nationalism with yet more vigour and populist appeal and codified them in the 1937 constitution of a Gaelic catholic nation.

It would seem that Peadar O'Donnell had some sense of such a dynamic in Irish history, between two competing concepts of what defined and characterised the nation. In a reminiscence published in 1974, he observed:

> The Irish Separatist Movement from Wolfe Tone onwards has always consisted of two streams, one stretched back to the Republic, the other to the old Gaelic State, old glories and majesties, more Monarchist and pre-Republican and concerned with sovereign independence rather than with the Republic.[12]

It is interesting that he describes the 'old Gaelic state' tradition as 'pre-

republican'. As a historic phenomenon, republicanism, as the generative species of political nationalism, predates the nineteenth-century phenomenon of cultural nationalism. However, the historic myth to which cultural nationalism appeals—in Ireland, that of the Christian Gaelic nation—does refer back to an older time than that of the first republican nation states. In speaking of the 'old glories and majesties' of that Gaelic state, O'Donnell evinces an understanding of the mythic memory of a historic national greatness that supplies cultural nationalism with much of its emotive power. Also interesting is the distinction that he draws between 'sovereign independence' and 'the republic'; as suggested by the constitution debate, for O'Donnell the idea of 'the republic' is about much more than political independence, it is about the definition and character of the nation state.

The 1937 Republican Congress manifesto decried the constitutional provisions on both property and religion as a 'betrayal' that had 'outraged … the whole tradition of the Fenian struggle'. This is an important locution: 'Fenian' is a key word in O'Donnell's vocabulary of political discourse. Throughout his career, his polemic was riddled with references to 'Fenian Ireland', 'Fenian radicalism', and 'the Fenian countryside'. In the same 1974 reminiscence quoted above, he suggested that the phrase that best described his political ideology was 'social Fenian'.[13] In its call to the Irish people to 'redeclare the republic', the Congress manifesto made specific reference to the 1916 proclamation as 'the people's charter', but its reference to the tradition of Fenian struggle harkened back to a yet earlier republican declaration, the proclamation of an Irish republic rendered by the Fenian Brotherhood on the eve of the 1867 rising. Expressive of a politically nationalist ideology in its consciousness of an aggrieved citizenry moved to revolution against despotic government and of society as a compact intended to safeguard natural human rights, this document foreshadows by some seventy years the 1937 Congress manifesto by linking together republican principle, social radicalism (specifically radical reform of property relations), secularism, and equality of all citizens before the law. Declaring that, 'unable longer to endure the curse of monarchical government, we aim at founding a republic based on universal suffrage, which shall secure to all the intrinsic value of their labour', the 1867 Fenians addressed in successive clauses the same two issues of property rights and religious liberties that would be contentious constitutional issues for the 1937 left republicans:

> The soil of Ireland, at present in the possession of an oligarchy, belongs to us, the Irish people, and to us it must be restored.

> We declare, also, in favour of absolute liberty of conscience, and complete separation of Church and State.[14]

Herein may be identified another dimension of O'Donnell's assertion of a 'real republicanism'. His republicanism was 'real' in reaffirming a version of republicanism in Ireland that existed prior to the dilution of the republican idea and the usurpation of the republican name by a species of cultural nationalism. His was the republicanism of Wolfe Tone and of the 1867 Fenians, the republicanism of the American and the French revolutions.

Thus, the conflict in 1940 among the competing strains of Irish republicanism and between republicanism and Fine Gael nationalism, was not in essence an argument about the terms of the treaty, the legitimacy of the Free State, or the use of constitutional means versus physical force. These were all parts of the argument, but not the core of the argument. The conflict was about the very idea of the nation, a contest between two competing concepts of the definition and character of the nation. It was a conflict between two cultures, one signified by the republic, the other by the Gaelic nation. It was, therefore, appropriate that O'Donnell's new departure into the field of discourse would take not the form of polemic, but of cultural discourse in the broadest sense.

The discourse of *The Bell*

Throughout his political activism, O'Donnell had repeatedly striven to forge alliances: broad coalitions of related, but disparate political forces. Republican Congress had been the exemplar of this, as a popular front of republicans, socialists, trade unionists, agrarian radicals, progressives of every ilk. Now, as his field of engagement moved from politics to cultural discourse, he would forge an alliance among cultural figures—artists of disparate backgrounds, viewpoints, interests and visions, but alike in a commitment to open and humane dialogue and debate. The Republican Congress had had its day. The new departure would be a republican symposium in print.

Foremost among the allies recruited by O'Donnell was, of course, Sean O'Faolain. As late as 1945, O'Faolain would state in a *Bell* editorial his continuing belief that the anti-treaty republicans had been politically and morally right in refusing to accept the treaty even after its ratification by popular vote because that vote had been secured under threat of force, while conceding that the form taken by their refusal might have been politically unwise.[15] However, it is unlikely that by 1940 he would still have described himself as a republican, being deeply suspicious of terms

that he saw as 'abstractions'. But, he did bring to *The Bell* a concept of the Irish nation, a concept which can, I believe, in light of the above discussion, be described as 'republican'. O'Faolain typified the creative artist with a deep social concern, engaging in discourse on matters of civic interest. O'Donnell complemented him, being more the political activist with an interest in literature, who turned to creative writing as one weapon in his arsenal. This article has concentrated on the political career and ideology of O'Donnell, as the person who initiated the idea of *The Bell* and who had maintained a more intimate connection with the republican movement and the republican name. It remains to look at *The Bell* itself, at what it had to say and how it said it, and to identify how the discourse in which it engaged could be described as republican. Although O'Donnell had been the prime mover in initiating the journal and remained a powerful influence on its policy through his role on the editorial board, it was O'Faolain as editor who had the determining role in shaping its ethos.

From its inception, *The Bell* challenged the ethos and ideology of the Gaelic national state, the essentialist cultural community of the catholic Gaels. Direct attacks on the Gaelic state were launched through the medium of its commentary, enunciated largely in the early years in O'Faolain's monthly editorials. But, it was not so much in what was said in direct political comment that *The Bell* expressed an ethos of civic republicanism, as in the whole body of its discourse and the style in which the discourse was conducted. *The Bell* was republican in its content and in its style.

The Bell was expressive of a civic republicanism in two interrelated ways: it was *inclusive* and it was *inquisitive*. From the very first number, that of October 1940, O'Faolain made this crystal clear: 'We are absolutely inclusive … Whoever you are, then, O reader, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, priest or layman, Big House or Small House—THE BELL is yours'. In the issues that followed, he astutely made good on that pledge, publishing the work of a varied set of contributors. He exhorted his readers to contribute material drawn from their own 'actual experience', on life as they knew it and daily lived it: 'You who read this know intimately some corner of life that nobody else can know'. The magazine's purpose was to depict 'a bit of Life itself … to encourage Life to speak', for 'THE BELL stands … for Life before any abstraction'.[16]

Thus, *The Bell* set out to be not just a literary magazine (though the quality of its creative writing and literary criticism was high), but also a compendium of Irish life as it was actually lived. It published a lengthy series on the country theatre; Lennox Robinson on the county libraries;

Flann O'Brien on Dublin pubs, dog racing and dance halls; Elizabeth Bowen on the big house; the personal experiences of a slum dweller, of an orphaned child, of illegitimacy, of life on the dole; an article on prisons; profiles of Irish writers based on personal familiarity: AE, Yeats, Joyce. *The Bell* included articles on vernacular furniture, house decoration and women's hats; a piece on life in a teacher training college; a personal experience of a tuberculosis sanatorium, another of a borstal (by Brendan Behan—the germ of *Borstal Boy*). An entire issue, that of July 1941, was devoted to Ulster. There was a series describing people's lives on certain levels of income, another on the daily routine of persons in different walks of life. The Irish ballet club; a country bookshop; the Irish fisheries; the Sisters of Charity; Dublin restaurants; Irish whiskey; the National Gallery: no subject was too mundane to escape *The Bell*'s scrutiny. The first year in print concluded with a symposium of five contributors, each representing a particular strain of influence that had helped shape the national experience: the Gaelic, the classical, the Norman, the Anglo-Irish, and the English.

What does all this represent if not the republican value of inclusiveness, of open citizenship: every one and every experience belongs to the nation. Month by month, *The Bell* methodically composed a picture of the Irish nation as it really was, not as nationalist myth would have it. Thus, the nation was described as a diversity of people, places, activities, functions, and experiences. And O'Faolain insisted that each and every element of this diversity was equally Irish. Thus was unveiled the hidden Ireland of the twentieth century, those aspects of the national life ignored by official Ireland as incompatible with the national self-image propagated by Gaelicist myth. *The Bell* gave a voice to individuals marginalised by that official myth. In doing so, it realised yet another principle of O'Donnell's 'real republicanism': if the people of the nation are to rule, the people (all of them) must have a voice. *The Bell* was the forum in which each voice could be heard.

In thus refuting the nationalist myth, O'Faolain set out his own credo:

> The romantic illusion, fostered by the Celtic Twilight, that the West of Ireland, with its red petticoats and bawneens, is for some reason more Irish than Guinness' Brewery or Dwyer's Sunbeam-Wolsey factory, has no longer any basis whatever.[17]

Therein lies the fundamental clash between the republican concept of the nation and the nationalist concept. To the republican, everything and everyone in Ireland is Irish. This assertion clashes head-on with the credo of the Gaelic nation that certain features of life in Ireland—the Irish

language, the peasantry of the west, Gaelic games—are more authentically Irish because expressive of the authentic character of the essentialist cultural community. The clash is apparent in the attitude taken by *The Bell* to the Irish language. To O'Faolain, the language was part of contemporary Irish life, of contemporary Irish experience. Some people in Ireland spoke Irish, and they spoke it with varying degrees of frequency. Almost every person in Ireland spoke English, and most of them employed English as their common medium of communication and expression. These are facts. The Irish language is to be respected and given its space as part of the national life as it was being lived. But, it was not to be granted preferential treatment, nor regarded as some sacred repository of the national soul.

The style in which this panoply of the Irish nation was presented may also be regarded as republican in ethos. *The Bell* was inquisitive, its method documentary and empirical, gleaming the cold light of fact on every subject covered. It took as its *modus operandi* the first stage of the scientific method: the observation, accumulation and presentation of fact. Such a methodology seems redolent of the spirit of enlightenment rationalism and scientific enquiry, the foundation of modern republican ideology. It is the methodology of the eighteenth-century French encyclopaedists, with their project of description and cataloguing, deemed subversive by the mystifying *ancien régime*. In fiction, *The Bell* championed realism as the mode most appropriate to Ireland in its present stage of development.

Cultural nationalism starts from the premise that certain things existing within the national territory are essential to the national character; the rest are alien. When the nationalist myth becomes entrenched, those things within the nation that conflict with the myth are ignored, denied, and swept into the margins. Therefore, the first step in the project of demystification is the presentation of things as they are: the facts in their totality. Myth is to be dispelled by laying out, patiently, methodically and comprehensively, the facts as they are. O'Faolain expressed this as another credo:

> 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.[18]

(The language to which he briefly reverts is interesting—the language of the enlightenment, of republican revolution.) O'Faolain purported to commence this project without any preconceived idea as to what the national character was. A picture of that character could emerge only as

the facts were accumulated. He identified the character of *The Bell* with 'the character of Irish life which is here free to speak out for itself. That is happening: the pattern is emerging; but it will only emerge clearly and fully when everybody has co-operated'.[19] Yet, this empirical approach does encompass a starting premise, a premise in the spirit of political nationalism, of republicanism: that the entire panoply of fact, of things as they are, of life as it is actually lived, is indeed what constitutes the national character.

In an editorial of June 1941, O'Faolain declared that 'this country is at the beginning of its creative history, and at the end of its revolutionary history … The period of political and military struggle is over, or virtually over (we devoutly hope!); and the period of creation has arrived'.[20] Peadar O'Donnell would have put the matter differently: for him, political struggle (revolutionary struggle) was continuing, albeit in a different mode than before, that of cultural discourse, the mode most appropriate to the objective conditions then prevailing. However, O'Faolain's formulation did, in fact, mirror the shape of O'Donnell's career, in which the launch of *The Bell* proved a watershed. From his prior concentration on revolutionary political activity, to which his writing had been secondary, for the next fifteen years and beyond his primary preoccupation would be with cultural activity: his involvement with *The Bell*, the composition of his sixth and finest novel, *The Big Windows* (1954), and the patronage and promotion of literature and the arts. His subsequent political activity avoided revolutionary initiatives to overturn the system and the state and was confined to ad hoc pressure groups campaigning on specific issues.

The Bell represented a discursive intervention at a particular moment in Irish political and cultural history. It was a response to that moment and became a part of the moment. Its particular method of discourse, in its content and its style, arising from and promoting an ethos of civic republicanism, was conditioned by the circumstances of that moment, by the necessity to engage in cultural debate with the all-domineering and smothering ideology of a cultural-nationalist state. As such, it gives an insight into what a contribution to cultural discourse coming from a perspective of civic republicanism and intervening at a particular historic moment might be like.

Notes

[1] Peter Hegarty, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Dublin: Mercier 1999), p. 241. The other recent biography is Donal Ó Drisceoil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork: Cork University Press 2001), which concentrates on analysis of his political development.

[2] Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day* (Dublin: Dolmen 1963), p. 120.

[3] George Gilmore, *The Irish Republican Congress* (Cork: Cork Workers' Club 1978), p. 52; Michael McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel* (Dublin: O'Brien 1974), p. 136.

[4] The phrases were used by O'Donnell in his address to the first, fateful, Republican Congress in Rathmines town hall, Co. Dublin, on 29–30 September 1934. See George Gilmore, *The Irish Republican Congress* (Cork: Cork Workers' Club 1978), p. 53.

[5] The leftist organisations were the Communist Party of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Socialist Party.

[6] The issues of the *Irish Democrat* were those of 8, 15 and 22 May 1937. Dates of specific references are indicated in the text.

[7] See J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), pp. 203, 206.

[8] *The Bell*, vol. x, no. 3 (June 1945), p. 200.

[9] Some of the *Democrat* articles, including that by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and another, of 15 May, by her son Owen Sheehy Skeffington, took issue with the constitutional provisions regarding personal rights (Article 40); in particular, with the fact that the guarantees of free speech and assembly and a free press were made conditional, 'subject to public order and morality' and 'the authority of the state'. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington noted that capital punishment had been retained, wryly observing that 'the British hangman has not been dispensed with—perhaps he is the link with the Crown …'

[10] In the discussion that follows, I have relied primarily on: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso 1991) (Rev. ed.); John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin 1987); and Maurice Goldring, *Pleasant the Scholar's Life: Irish Intellectuals and the Construction of the Nation State* (London: Serif 1993).

[11] Benedict Anderson situates the origins as a political movement of what I have termed political nationalism in what he calls the 'Creole republics' of the Americas that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; these republican nation states were founded by 'Creoles', the American-born descendants of European settlers. The French revolution, though lacking the separatist dimension of American republicanism, was a powerful stimulus to the development and propagation of concepts of political nationalism. Cultural nationalism emerged as a political movement in the nineteenth century among separatist groupings within the polyglot empires of eastern and central Europe. Despite the republican origins of political nationalism, it is true that some later political nationalists, in Ireland and elsewhere as Hutchinson has demonstrated, accommodated a fundamentally political conception of the nation with monarchical or imperial institutions.

[12] Michael McInerney, *Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel* (Dublin: O'Brien 1974), p. 94. McInerney's book is based on interviews with O'Donnell that were also the basis of a series of articles published in the *Irish Times* in April 1968.

[13] Ibid., p. 237.

[14] Reprinted in Alan O'Day and John Stevenson (eds.), *Irish Historical Documents Since 1800* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 1992), pp. 76–7. The proclamation was originally published in *The Nation*, 9 March 1867.

[15] See *The Bell*, vol. x, no. 1 (April 1945), p. 3.

[16] See 'This Is Your Magazine', *The Bell*, vol. i, no. 1 (Oct. 1940), pp. 5–9.

[17] *The Bell*, vol. vi, no. 6 (Sept. 1943), p. 460.

[18] Ibid., vol. i, no. 3 (Dec. 1940), p. 6.
[19] Ibid., vol. i, no. 5 (Feb. 1941), p. 5.
[20] Ibid., vol. ii, no. 3 (June 1941), p. 6.