

O'Faoláin's Great O'Neill

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I want to look Seán O'Faoláin the historian. He wrote some terrific historical biographies - they are well-paced narratives; he attempted to put his subjects in context, the results are dramatic and intellectually engaging. His *Great O'Neill* (1942) in particular has been reprinted several times and is still influential in the formation of views about early modern Ireland and especially about Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone. In addition to the biography of O'Neill, he wrote others on O'Connell, Constance Markievicz, John Henry Newman and two on De Valera. He also edited the autobiography of *Wolfe Tone*, penned a short illustrated history, *The Story of Ireland* (1943) and covered a lot of history in his thematic interpretation, *The Irish* (1969).

As an historian O'Faoláin ought to be seen as the left wing of the Catholic nationalist school of history and literary history based at UCC around such figures as Hogan, O'Rahilly and Corkery. He contested the latter's *Hidden Ireland* thesis but like them he was interested in culture and continental connections. At the same time O'Faoláin shared some of liberal credentials of the Moody-Dudley Edwards school then being devised on the Dublin-Belfast axis. However he shared none of their academic, social and political background and was not at all interested in their scholarly conventions - the use of archival sources or its concern for the style of footnotes. He wrote for the market, to make a living - he read the printed primary sources, consulted scholars and read their latest work including university dissertations. O'Faoláin was widely read in Irish history but he had little theoretical knowledge of historiography or critical grasp of historiographical problems. Besides historians, he refers to historical novelists such as Scott and Balzac, and for a biographer he shows no knowledge of psychology. Something of his general approach and viewpoint can be gleaned from *the Story of Ireland* (1943). It was written for Collins' 'Britain in Pictures' series. It begins with a geographical tour round Ireland which makes for depressing reading and gives a history of foreign invasions in which heroes like Fitzmaurice, O'Neill and O'Connell attempt to drag the Irish people out of their hidebound traditions. 'The outstanding thing that emerges in this record' - he says rather paradoxically it seems to me - 'is the rise, in Ireland, of a

growing democratic intelligence'. Its ends with a defence of wartime neutrality despite his own misgivings about De Valera's social policies.

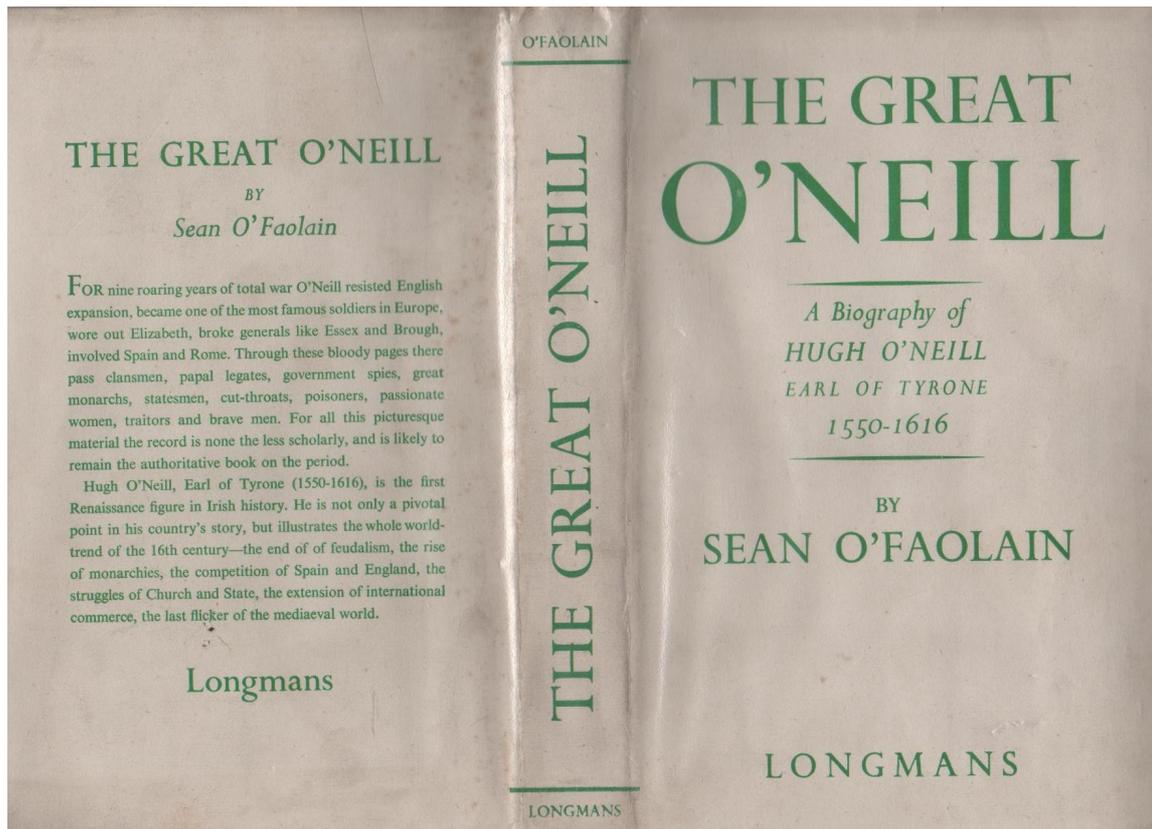
I would be rather critical of O'Faoláin's method as an historian but I do think he wrote history of some importance. It seems to me that in writing his biographies he does something very interesting - he remakes the concept of the Irish hero. Yes, he debunks them to some extent but more fundamentally he also intellectualises them, even hitherto military figures like O'Neill. Interestingly all his biographical subjects have, or are perceived to have by O'Faoláin, identity problems, either personal, religious, national, sometimes all three. Three of the most important figures have also marks of the mythical hero - O'Neill, O'Connell and Dev. They undergo a sort of fosterage outside the nuclear family in which they get wisdom in their wider society and in the world of affairs. At any rate intellectualising these heroes refashions the Irish hero. One of the aspects of these heroes is that they are also modernising heroes. They are figures who have encompassed modern ideas and embraced them and are conceived by O'Faoláin as singlehandedly trying to pull the recalcitrant Irish nation with them towards modernity.

There is also at times a contradiction in the way he portrays these individuals, in particular O'Connell, as an embodiment of the nation. How can these modernisers personify a nation which is traditional? O'Faoláin's approach to these national leaders is also very contemporary. O'Faoláin is writing in an era of Great Men and the Masses - not only of European dictators like Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini but also of democratic leaders like Churchill, Roosevelt and De Valera. I am not casting any aspersions on O'Faoláin's democratic credentials rather pointing out that he sees history as the actions of great men not of social movements. Furthermore this contemporary crop of leaders are all self-conscious modernisers of their nations - the exception is Dev. And of course to O'Faoláin he was a severe disappointment. The other contemporary element in this regard is O'Faoláin himself. He has lionised the Irish hero as an intellectual. What was O'Faoláin? He himself was or portrayed himself as a modernising intellect locked in battle with the recalcitrant, obstrantacist mindset of traditional Ireland, or at least Dev neo-traditionalist version. Indeed Seán O'Faoláin (born 1900 John Whelan the son of a Cork city RIC man) had sought in the revolutionary period to consciously refashion his own identity.

This brings me to the other idea which O'Faoláin continually harps on - the Irish mind. This Irish mind is inward-looking, unreflective,

intellectually impoverished, proud, vainglorious, wasteful, passionate, destructive. This is a racial concept - the characteristics are considered innate. Not only that, it was also a racist construct which came in classical, renaissance, reformation and enlightenment versions. O'Faoláin had picked up the most recent version - the Victorian one and its idea of the Celtic failure to develop either individualism or statehood. And the traditional Irish society doomed in the face of waves of modernisation - humanism, rationalism, modernism etc. For O'Faoláin the only means of escape was cultural - acculturation by outside contact with the modernising forces in the world. The problem is that innate Irish characteristics seem to be more important when the chips are down than cultural conditioning. Nature overcomes nurture. For instance O'Neill, having fought a long, careful, and controlled guerrilla war against the English, makes the fateful decision to commit himself to a pitched battle at Kinsale. In doing so he gave way to 'a racial psychosis in which patience and a regard for time and the discipline of restraint played but a small part'.

Though O'Faoláin's ideas on the Irish mind are nothing special, one aspect is novel and is an interesting insight into modern Irishness. He portrays a number of his biographical subjects with divided minds - individuals equally at home in the traditional world and in the modernising, cosmopolitan outside world. This is especially the case with the anglicised Hugh O'Neill. In a sense Hugh O'Neill became in O'Faoláin's hands a synecdoche for all modern Irishmen. At home in the English world, comprehending it fully but not of it. An ambiguous figure. Potentially a threat to heart of the imperial system. By the same token, by dint of Anglicisation, he is likewise a threat to the integrity of his own society. However ultimately I think this is a flawed and misleading insight. One person does not inhabit two worlds. No society however closed is entirely cut off from the outside. Furthermore no society is entirely traditional and unchanging and no society completely modern and dynamic. The physical world is a continuum and time is continuous!



His biography of O'Neill has made the greatest impact on historiography, especially popular historiography. Like all O'Faoláin's biographies - for instance *The King of the Beggars* about Daniel O'Connell - this book is as much about working through his frustrations about traditional, hide-bound Ireland as it is about the subject itself. More specifically, he had become progressively disillusioned with De Valera's Ireland and indeed with the re-Gaelicizing, nationalist project generally. From what he tells us in the preface it is plain that he is setting out to write a revisionist history of O'Neill: 'The traditional picture of the patriot O'Neill, locked into the Gaelic world, eager to assault England, is not supported by the facts and must be acknowledged complete fantasy. He was by no means representative of the Old Gaelic world and had, at most, only an ambiguous sympathy with what he found himself so ironically obliged to defend with obstinacy. He never desired to attack England, and avoided the clash for over twenty-five years of his life, more than a quarter of a century. His life proves once again that, to be intelligible, history must be taken on a lower key than patriotism. Indeed it is a sardonic comment on patriotic feeling that, finding him unsuitable to its purposes, it has obliterated his truth with one marching-song, O'Donnell Abu (Radio Éireann's call signal), which glorifies all that wild spirit of undisciplined and thoughtless valour which throughout his life he set himself to tame'

In this respect O'Faoláin may be considered a revisionist *avant la lettre*. Unfortunately the father of Irish revisionism made a number of incredible errors in his writing up of Hugh O'Neill. First of all, he not only accepted but greatly enhanced the idea of Hugh O'Neill's upbringing in England. He gave his subject eight years in England and greatly embroidered with fanciful stories his alleged time with Sidney at Ludlow and Penshurst and at the Court of Elizabeth. In accomplishing this he had rejected that the view hitherto that O'Neill had gone to England with Sidney in 1562. He never thought to reject the idea altogether because all the available evidence suggests that O'Neill was brought up by Giles Hovenden and his wife at Balgriffin, near Dublin, which was a property the state had granted his grandfather, Conn, along with the earldom of Tyrone in the 1540s. O'Faoláin's ahistorical take on O'Neill's early years consequently warped his interpretation of his subject's character making him an individual caught between two worlds – the modernizing English Renaissance world and an ancient, tradition-bound Gaelic society. This interpretation becomes significant in O'Faoláin's view at the beginning of the nine years war with England. Here he portrays O'Neill as vacillating, unable to decide which side he is on and being pushed into rebellion by unreconstructed Gaelic clients he was unable to control. The opposite is the case. O'Neill was a shrewd politician at ease with both cultures who behind the scenes was using his relatives as proxies whilst bribing officials to cover up his blatant disregard for English law and policy.

Again, to O'Neill's decision to fight the decisive, and at it turned out disastrous, battle of Kinsale, O'Faoláin brings his own agenda. 'In deciding to attack he turned his whole attitude, his whole mental outlook, his idea of life, his entire critical opinion of Ireland inside out. For what had been the curse of Ireland for centuries was rashness, and recklessness, and improvidence, and incogitancy, tons of courage and hardly an ounce of brains, all the qualities and faults that naturally depend from the turbulent life of the border. These had created a racial psychosis in which patience and a regard for time and the discipline of restraint but a small part'. For this he blames the counsels of the other chiefs, particularly younger and more impulsive O'Donnell, who represented to O'Faoláin the embodiment of the wild element in the Irish mindset. In fact none of the Irish leaders at Kinsale were particularly anxious to fight the battle but had little choice having answered the call of the beleaguered Spaniards.

Another mistake of O'Faoláin that has been since compounded is his treatment of O'Neill's time as exile in Rome. Basically at this stage in the composition of his book, he had run out of time or information or both. After the Flight of the Earls in 1607 which is barely examined at all, he has Peter Lombard, the archbishop of Armagh, interviewing the increasingly tipsy and maudlin O'Neill as he wrote up O'Neill's life story. In fact this book - Lombard's *De Regno Hiberniae Commentarius* - had been written in Rome in 1600 in an attempt to gain Pope Clement VIII's support for O'Neill's war. Indeed during their time together in the Salviati Palace Lombard and O'Neill were often at loggerheads because the archbishop, an old English man from Waterford, wished to pursue a conciliatory policy with James I whilst the Ulsterman far from giving up was still plotting a victorious return. In Brian Friel's *Making History* (1987) all of O'Faoláin's ideas are repeated and indeed exaggerated. O'Faoláin had himself provided him with the idea in the preface to his book: 'Indeed, in those last years in Rome the myth was already beginning to emerge, and a talented dramatist might write an informative, entertaining, ironical play on the theme of the living man helplessly watching his translation in the face of all the facts that had reduced him to poverty, exile and defeat'.

Seán O'Faoláin's agenda gave O'Neill, the subtle politician and able soldier, aspects he did not have. It was his *Great O'Neill* which configured Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, as a European; and not only that but as an intellectual and a moderniser to boot. In a highly-rhetorical conclusion to his influential biography, he claimed that O'Neill ought to be considered a figure of European stature rather than a hero of merely local standing. This was because the Irish leader, he asserted, understood or 'at any rate felt intuitively' that he and his confederates were involved in a wider conflict of world significance and that this alleged comparative approach by him to Ireland's problems and mentalities was the first self-critical step towards obtaining its place in the European system. He further claimed that the tradition-bound people of Ireland had ignored and have continued to ignore 'the intellectual, creative quality in him which entitles him to be called a European figure.' Indeed that it was not England that had defeated O'Neill but it was Ireland with all its atavism and inbreeding. 'Fortunately for his country, however, he associated his struggle for independence with the whole movement of the Counter-Reformation, and that was a European idea and a European link, and it gave his people access to a great heritage of culture and tradition from which the principle of Development has never been absent'. Not only had his engagement coloured all future nationalism in the purple and gold of the Papacy but it enabled the salvaging of some enlightenment from the old Gaelic world to

facilitate future intercourse with ‘the ubiquitous and contemporaneous world of the civilized mind’. O’Faoláin’s summation is an editorial stream of consciousness mixing conjecture, assertion and half-truth rather than a conclusion based on deductions from evidence.

Even so O’Faoláin’s novelistic style, strong throughout the book and getting stronger crescendo-like at the end, still inspires in its attempt to evoke tension and atmosphere. As an example of the sheer panache and power of this writing, I want to read you the penultimate paragraph of his *Great O’Neill*:

‘Idly his fingers touch the Archbishop’s manuscript and, snuffing the candle, he draws it to him. This is his life, his mind, his soul. Here are thirty crowded years of ambition and of bloodshed, of intrigue and manoeuvre, of victory and utter defeat. The figures rise, a bloody procession. Turlough and Gaveloch and ‘that idiot’ Florence MacCarthy, Maguire who was a brave man, and Niall Garv who was a braver man but a traitor, Harry Hovenden who never lied to him, that wild fellow Tom Lee, young Red Hugh O’Donnell who had more dash than any ten of them – the men he made, the men he tortured, the men he broke, the men he murdered, the men he sold, the men he bought... his dead wives... his dead children... And every word that he reads is untrue. Lombard has translated him into a star like those stars over the city roofs. He has seen it all as a glorious story that was in every thread a heartbreak. He has made his Life into a Myth. The massive, squat frame shudders into a series of jerking chuckles. The fading eyes peer sardonically through their red eyelashes. Then the chuckle breaks into a sob and the broad body falls on the table, crying as helplessly as a child. Must we Irish always be weaving fancy, living always in the fantastic world of a dream? As the old drunken man sobs in his rage and misery the glass tumbles, the wine slowly spills across the historian’s page a long red streak of blood’.

Great stuff for sure but it is not history.

Posted by *HIRAM MORGAN IRCHSS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, February 2009*