

Ó Faracháin, Roibeárd (Farren, Robert)

by Bridget Hourican

Ó Faracháin, Roibeárd (Farren, Robert) (1909–84), poet, broadcaster, and director of the Abbey Theatre, was born Robert Farren on 24 April 1909 in Lower Grand Canal St., Dublin, son of Henry Farren, stone-cutter, and Catherine Farren (née Gray). His father, who played a prominent role in the 1913 lockout, came from a distinguished labour family: one brother, John Farren, was secretary-treasurer of the ITGWU, and another, Tom Farren (qv), was a Labour senator. Robert was educated at Haddington St. national school and St Patrick's teacher training college, Drumcondra. After qualifying (1928), he began teaching in national schools and developing his literary interests. Holidays in the Gaeltacht left him fluent in Irish, and his first two books were short stories in Irish and a translation of an English novel. All his books were published under the name 'Ó Faracháin', although in other professional capacities he was also known as 'Farren'. In 1936 came *Thronging feet*, a book of verse. This earned him the label of 'catholic poet'. His profound faith informed his intellect; he wrote his MA thesis for UCC on Thomist philosophy and was editor (1937–9) of the *Capuchin Annual*. His conservative catholicism, taken with his fervent nationalism and commitment to the Irish language, led to his being pilloried as an establishment poet by Patrick Kavanagh (qv) in 'The Paddiad'. In August 1939 he was appointed talks officer of the newly expanded Radio Éireann at an annual salary of £600. His youth and inexperience annoyed his new colleagues, who claimed that only his knowledge of Irish secured him the job. The director of broadcasting, T. J. Kiernan (qv), had wanted the non-Irish-speaking writer Brinsley McNamara (qv) for the post, and in his first annual report he wrote that he was disappointed with the new recruit. This judgement did not hold: in his thirty-five years with Radio Éireann (later RTÉ) Ó Faracháin was frequently promoted – general features editor (1943), deputy director (1947), controller of radio programmes (1953) – and was well regarded, but his initial reception left him feeling ill-used. His contributions to Radio Éireann included modernising the Irish-language programmes; raising fees for writers; expanding the symphony orchestra; establishing a permanent repertory acting company; and maintaining a high standard of poetry programmes: 'New verse competition' helped discover W. R. Rodgers (qv) and John Hewitt (qv), and with Austin Clarke (qv) Ó Faracháin founded the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society, which produced verse plays for radio and trained actors to recite rhythmically.

A year after joining Radio Éireann, Ó Faracháin was appointed to the board of the Abbey Theatre in October 1940, probably at the instigation of Ernest Blythe (qv), who became managing director of the Abbey in 1941, and who saw in Ó Faracháin a supporter of his mission to create an Irish-speaking, nationalist theatre. This policy of recruiting Irish-speaking actors to perform in Irish-language plays annoyed theatre-goers, including the redoubtable Joseph Holloway (qv), who wrote

in his diary: 'All three directors have the Gaelic bee in their bonnets and behave like children in foisting Gaelic plays on the Gaels who have no love for sitting out Gaelic plays' (Holloway, iii, 89 (30 May 1943)). The number of new plays fell and the standard of performances dropped; in November 1947 criticism reached a height when the poet Valentin Iremonger (qv) stood up after a performance of 'The plough and the stars' and denounced the incompetence of the present directorate's artistic policy. In the ensuing press furore Blythe refused to comment, and it was left to Ó Faracháin to defend the theatre and to bring about the appointment of Ria Mooney (qv) as play director. She later complained that her engagement was looked on by the directors as a 'holding' position until an Irish-speaker could be appointed. The strengths and weaknesses of the Abbey in the three decades from 1940 can be largely attributed to the formidable Blythe, but he was supported in all essentials by Ó Faracháin, who did not long survive Blythe's resignation; in October 1973 he was voted off the board in favour of a shareholder. His most innovative contribution to the Abbey was the formation, with Clarke, of the Lyric Theatre Company in 1944, which grew out of the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society, and which rented the Abbey for performances of verse drama on Sunday nights until 1951. The critic Robert Hogan (1930–99) commended this company for keeping alive the verse drama tradition in the post-Yeatsian days.

Among the plays performed by the Lyric was Ó Faracháin's 'Lost light' (1943), which dealt with the 1916 rising; it was revived for the 1966 commemoration. However, due perhaps to his other commitments, Ó Faracháin was not a prolific writer and largely ceased publishing after 1950. His oeuvre includes four books of verse in English, of which the best-regarded is *The first exile* (1944), a long epic poem on the life of Colum Cille (qv) which the broadcaster Seán Mac Réamoinn called remarkable, but which Hogan found lacking in drama, imagery, and narrative thrust. Ó Faracháin's play 'Assembly at Druim Ceat' (c.1943), also about Colum Cille, was remade for radio into the acclaimed 'The lords and the bards' with a musical score by Seán Ó Riada (qv) in 1959. He also wrote three books of literary history and criticism, including *The course of Irish verse* (1947).

For the last ten years of his life he lived in retirement and died at home in Greenfield Park, Mount Merrion, Dublin, on 29 December 1984, survived by his wife Maureen (née Smyth) and by two sons and three daughters.

GRO, birth cert.; *Times*, 17 Sept. 1963; Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (1967); Robert Hogan, *After the Irish renaissance* (1967); Robert Hogan and M. J. O'Neill, *Joseph Holloway's Irish theatre*, iii (1970), 89; Louis McRedmond (ed.), *Written on the wind: personal memories of Irish radio, 1926–76* (1976); Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey 1904–1978* (1979); *Ir. Times*, 31 Dec. 1984;

McRedmond; Hogan; Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke: a critical introduction* (1989);
Robert Welch, *The Abbey theatre, 1899–1999* (1999)

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