

Bell, (John) Bowyer

by Patrick Maume

Bell, (John) Bowyer (1931–2003), writer on the IRA and artist, was born 15 November 1931 in New York City, but grew up in Alabama after his parents moved there. He majored in history at undergraduate level at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia; at the same time he took art classes and 'discovered I had total visual memory – the equivalent of perfect pitch in a singer'. His first solo art show was in the college library in his senior year. Bell made regular trips to New York, where he socialised with other artists including his hero Franz Kline (1910–62); having observed their impoverished lifestyle, he decided to combine art with a career in academia. He was known to friends as 'Bow' or 'Bo'.

Bell undertook postgraduate research in diplomatic history and comparative government at Duke University, North Carolina, where he received his doctorate in 1958 for research on the Spanish civil war. During his studies at Duke he travelled to Rome University on a Fulbright; he took the opportunity to mix with writers and artists including the American Cy Twombly (with whom he studied), and to interview veterans of the Spanish civil war scattered across Europe. His Italian stay gave him a significant academic interest in Italian organised crime and its links to terrorism. After graduation he taught at Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Trinity School, Manhattan.

After marrying the Egyptologist Charlotte Rockey (1962) Bell settled in an apartment on West 89th Street, Manhattan; the marriage produced four daughters. In Manhattan he socialised with artists and writers including Jasper Johns, Jack Kerouac and Frank Stella, and painted in a style influenced by late abstract expressionism; the Bell apartment rapidly filled with books and artworks. Many of his own artworks were influenced by his academic interests; they include mixed-media work incorporating wires and batteries, and Bell often painted on his research trips (using small canvases for greater convenience in case he had to leave in a hurry). In the 1990s he added art criticism to his other professions, writing for the New York-based journal *Review* and producing catalogues for galleries and museum retrospectives. Those he encountered in each of his two different milieus were intrigued by the other aspect of his existence.

For most of his career Bell was an adjunct professor in international and public affairs at Columbia University, New York. He taught courses and supervised research, but was primarily an independent scholar who financed his research through foundation grants and journalism. He was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and founded a consultancy, the International Analysis Centre, whose clients included the US departments of state and justice, the CIA and American television networks. He received more than seven Guggenheim

fellowships (as well as a Pollock–Krasner fellowship for his paintings); at one point he declined a Rockefeller humanities award. His academic profile was based on incessant publication (he described his postgraduate strategy as to write his way back into academia), driven by worldwide research trips and extensive interviews.

While researching his first book, *Besieged: seven cities under siege* (1966), which includes material on the radical Zionist group Irgun in British-mandate Palestine, Bell discovered that the Irgun saw the war of independence IRA as a role model, both for their guerrilla tactics and for their ethos of self-sacrifice. (This admiration was reciprocated: Bell subsequently discovered that many IRA men read and admired Menachem Begin's memoir *The revolt* (1951) as a manual of guerrilla warfare. The subsequent development of Irish republican sympathy for the Palestinians tended retrospectively to obscure the extent to which mid-century Irish republicans admired the Zionist movement as fighting against direct British rule and the perceived British sympathy for the monarchical Arab states; while much of this sympathy was directed towards the dominant Labour Zionist tendency, it was easy to see the right-wing revisionist movement to which Begin belonged, with its anti-British militancy under the Mandate and willingness to challenge the professedly universalist Labour Zionist self-image, as resembling Irish republicans.)

In 1965 Bell and his family moved to St Mullins, Co. Carlow, for the summer; he expected that this would provide ample time to exhaust the subject of the IRA. He noted that the field was almost untouched; little had been written on any aspect of Irish history after 1922. He began research in the National Library of Ireland, then started interviewing republican activists. In 1967 the Bells moved to Ireland so that he could complete his research; their daughters went to Irish schools while he interviewed republicans in provincial hotels and other venues. His first visit to Belfast was in 1967, when he attended a banned Republican Clubs meeting. Sean Swan states, on the basis of an interview with the Official Sinn Féin activist Mick Ryan, that the IRA army council not only fully cooperated with Bell's research but enlisted him to assist their rethink of political tactics after 1962 by asking republicans why they believed what they did. Ryan claims Bell actually went on unspecified IRA operations (Swan, 12). In 1970 he published *The secret army: a history of the IRA 1916–1970*; this coincided with the outbreak of the Troubles and established Bell as a major expert on the IRA.

Bell researched and published on the Middle East, where he travelled extensively throughout his career; his works on the area included *The long war: Israel and the Arabs since 1946* (1969), *Horn of Africa: strategic magnet in the seventies* (1973), and *On revolt: strategies of national liberation* (1976), which was based on interviews with veterans of revolts against the British 'twilight empire' from Israel and Cyprus to Kenya and Aden. He also assisted with the *Sunday Times* Insight team's book on the 1974 Cypriot crisis. His last major research project, on Egyptian Islamic terrorism, was undertaken before the Islamist attack on New York city of 11 September 2001 but benefited from the subsequent intensification of public interest

on the subject; his last book was *Murder on the Nile: the World Trade Center and global terror* (2003).

Bell continued to visit Ireland every summer; he held annual exhibitions of his paintings at the Taylor Gallery, Dublin, from 1979, and could often be found 'holding court ... in the bar and lobby of Dublin's Central Hotel' (*An Phoblacht* obituary). He was bugged, shadowed, tear-gassed and shot at during Belfast riots, describing these experiences as 'field-work a little too near the centre of the field' (*Daily Telegraph*). *The secret army* remained continuously in print throughout the Troubles and was updated on several occasions. Bell's other publications included *The gun in politics: an analysis of Irish political conflict, 1916–1986* (1987) (an essay collection of material originally published in such journals as the *Irish Sword* and the *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgencies*); *IRA tactics and targets* (1990); *The Irish troubles: a generation of violence 1967–1992* (1993), a bulky chronicle/compilation; *In dubious battle: the Dublin bombings 1972–1974* (1996); and *The dynamics of armed struggle* (1998). (The nuts and bolts of technology and strategy were Bell's major area of strength; general works of reflection in this field included *The myth of the guerrilla* (1971); *Transnational terror* (1975); *A time of terror; how democratic societies respond to revolutionary violence* (1978); *Assassin: theory and practice of political violence* (1979; 2005); *To play the game: an analysis of sports* (1987); and *Dragonwars: armed struggle and the conventions of modern war* (1999)).

The IRA 1968–2000: analysis of a secret army (2000), more analytical than some earlier work, can be read as a final summation of Bell's Irish research. To a considerable extent he became the guardian of the IRA's institutional memory; towards the end of his life he regularly commented that he had studied the IRA for more years than most volunteers had been members, had attended more rallies and commemorations than most republicans, and over time had interviewed three generations of some republican families. It was recalled as an example of his thoroughness that when Republican Sinn Féin held its first Bodenstown demonstration after breaking with Provisional Sinn Féin, Bell stood on a bridge overlooking the march to gauge the size of the secession by counting the participants. In 1996 he was the first person to conduct an English-language interview of Continuity IRA representatives. (His longstanding acquaintance with the veterans who founded the breakaway movement doubtless assisted him in this.)

Bell's research methods provoked some controversy; he relied heavily on notes of interviews that were not written down or taped as they occurred. To some extent this approach was dictated by the nature of the subject matter. It also reflected the fact that Bell's primary aim was not to provide a compendium of factual material for his readers but to acquire a deposit of semi-articulated knowledge, 'research by osmosis', which lay behind his overall analysis; his texts are generally deeper and more insightful than they might appear at first glance. His prose style, intended to defamiliarise the subject and give outsiders some idea of what it might feel like to hold the republican worldview, was criticised as 'overblown and rhetorical' (*Times*

obituary, 23 Oct. 2003) – some affinities with his expressionist style of painting may be conjectured. As with many participant#observers, he was accused of getting too close to his subject, though this was also seen as a strength by some commentators; an obituary by Robert White maintained that the ‘unique’ extent of his interaction with the politically violent ‘gave him an insight that is often sorely lacking in the work of many academics’ on terrorism and political violence.

In 1994 when addressing a meeting at the (republican#influenced) West Belfast Festival, Bell caused controversy by stating that the IRA might be ruthless but they were purposeful, whereas loyalists were motivated by ‘fear and loathing’ and possessed no ‘compelling and luminous dream’. Partly in response to the subsequent outcry, Bell tried to address the perception that he was insufficiently interested in protestant/unionist perspectives by researching and writing *Back to the future: the protestants and a united Ireland* (1996), which expressed sympathy for some traditional unionist criticisms of the southern state and was generally accepted as sympathetic though somewhat patronising.

Charlotte Bell died in 1981 and Bell subsequently married (1985) Nora Browne, a teacher from Ballybunion, Co. Kerry, whom he met while filming his 1975 television documentary on the IRA, ‘The secret army’; there were no children of this marriage. He died of renal failure in New York on 23 August 2003. After his death a commemorative dinner was organised in his honour by individual republicans whose affiliations ranged from the Workers’ Party to Republican Sinn Féin (Swan, 12).

Bell was an engaging mixture of bohemian and academic; his eccentricities should not obscure the intellectual generosity to which his research contemporaries testified, his contribution to contemporary understanding of Irish political violence, and his zeal to work out, in art as in life, what he regarded as his central insight – ‘If you want an open society, you have to put up with the chaos’.

An Phoblacht, 28 Aug. 2003; *Saoirse*, Mean Fomhair/September 2003, 10–11; *Independent* (London), 26 Sept. 2003; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Oct. 2003; *Times*, 23 Oct. 2003 (obit.); Robert White, ‘J. Bowyer Bell’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17:3 (spring/summer 2005), 172; Sean Swan, *Official Irish republicanism, 1962 to 1972* (privately published, 2007); www.gainestimes.com/news/archive (accessed 5 May 2009)