

O'Faolain, Nuala

by Patrick Maume

O'Faolain, Nuala (1940–2008), journalist, writer and feminist, was born 1 March 1940 in Clontarf, Dublin, the second of nine children (six daughters and three sons) of Terry O'Sullivan (qv) (Terry Phelan), journalist and broadcaster, and his wife Kathleen (née O'Sullivan). Her father's extramarital relationships produced at least two half-siblings, one also called Nuala.

Parents and upbringing The increasingly chaotic marriage of her parents, marked by sometimes violent relations between a famous, hard-drinking, increasingly remote and unfaithful husband who mocked his wife's dependence, and a wife overwhelmed by housework and childcare, worn down by thirteen pregnancies, and consoling herself with alcohol and the memory of a passionate first decade of marriage, was central to O'Faolain's sense of identity. She believed that her parents had been utterly selfish and irresponsible, and were responsible for her problems and those of her siblings. (Two brothers died prematurely from alcoholism.) O'Faolain saw herself as having replicated many of the pathologies of both parents' lives. She regarded her parents as representative of a generation of bohemians reacting against the grim provincial catholic patriarchy of their upbringings but incapable of developing coherent alternative values. Her later attitudes to the broadcaster Gay Byrne (b. 1934) and the politician Charles Haughey (qv) were coloured by their affinities to her father (Byrne as a media celebrity and professional charmer from a similar, lower-middle-class background; Haughey as a school classmate and lifelong friend, who drank with Terry O'Sullivan in Groome's Hotel in Parnell Square where Dublin bohemia overlapped with the nascent Irish publicity industry and some younger politicians).

The family lived in rented accommodation in rural north Dublin and later in Clontarf; Nuala was the most outgoing of the children and their natural leader. She was educated at several national schools run by nuns in north county Dublin (including Malahide, Baldoyle, Laytown and Balbriggan), which she recalled as dominated by 'West British' gentility and violent physical punishment. (As day pupils rather than boarders, she and her sisters were considered socially inferior.) She remembered with particular bitterness being severely beaten after she waved to a friend while playing the Angel Gabriel in a school Christmas pageant. (For the cover of her 1996 memoir *Are you somebody?*, O'Faolain chose a picture by Alice Maher of a small girl dressed as an angel.) She developed a lifelong love of reading – because her parents allowed unrestricted reading, and because she sought internal escape. Her mother called her 'the brainy one' among her daughters.

At the age of 14, O'Faolain was expelled from national school after displaying raging pubertal attraction to males, and was sent to St Louis Convent boarding

school in Monaghan town. Her complicated feelings about the school's austere atmosphere punctuated with hothouse emotionality, combined both resentment and an awareness that its academic excellence had been a key factor in saving her from destruction. In later life she was highly conscious that her siblings had not received her educational opportunities.

Academia and bohemia O'Faolain left school aged 17 and reluctantly sat the entrance and scholarship exams for UCD aged 18. She lost her virginity and experienced a period of catholic piety, joining the Legion of Mary and (with lapses) the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association. Her first year studying English was disrupted by an overactive social life punctuated by catholic guilt and passionate commitment to the short-lived National Progressive Democrat political party led by Noel Browne (qv). After failing to sit her first-year exams she worked in menial jobs in England before re-admittance to UCD, assisted by family friends (including Mary Lavin (qv)). She graduated BA (English) in 1961, and spent a year in the University of Hull studying mediaeval English. She then returned to Dublin to study for a travelling studentship, which allowed her to take a B.Phil. at Oxford, on completion of which she obtained a lectureship in the department of English at UCD. Oxford brought her into contact with the social historian Raphael Samuel (1934–96), whose analytic techniques gave her a sense of the material historical development of provincial England which she later applied to Irish society and to Manhattan.

Student protestors during the 1968 UCD 'quiet revolution' criticised O'Faolain as sarcastic and authoritarian, a manner reflecting the difficulty of rousing large classes of students accustomed to rote learning, who did not seek the passionate engagement with the moral sphere demanded by serious literature. Some students responded to this passionate concern and would 'literally touch the hem of her academic gown' (McCafferty, 336).

During the 1960s O'Faolain inhabited bohemian Dublin, where intellectuals, writers, certain students and certain academics mingled in pubs and bedsitters. The writer Leland Bardwell was a semi-maternal figure; O'Faolain crossed paths with the veteran Patrick Kavanagh (qv) and the then unknown John McGahern (qv); the broadcaster Seán Mac Réamoinn (qv) became a lifelong personal friend and mentor. Her later recollections, written in a wealthier Dublin where cheap inner-urban lodgings had been replaced by offices and hotels, analyse in fascinating detail the workings of this society and how it resembled the Dublin of James Joyce (qv) in its genuine desire for knowledge and its (limited) inclusivity, but also in its underemployment, destructive drinking, and the subservient role it allocated to women.

O'Faolain herself shared these problems. She was shocked in retrospect by her willingness to be patronised and sexually used by male acquaintances in casual encounters, and the disjunction between her awareness of her dysfunctional family and her desire to take on the roles of wife and mother. O'Faolain never used

contraceptives, not merely because these were illegal and difficult to obtain, but from recklessness. (Her fertility may have been affected by an undiagnosed childhood tubercular infection. Her only pregnancy, at age 39, ended in early miscarriage.)

Apprentice broadcaster: Britain Her two major relationships of the 1960s (expected to end in marriage) were with a man she calls 'Michael', who introduced her at age 20 to classical music and travel (and the orgasm), and with the English art critic Tim Hilton (whom she calls 'Rob'), whom she met at Oxford. The latter relationship continued intermittently after O'Faolain moved to London in 1970 to take up a BBC job as producer of Open University programmes, and finally broke down (c.1974). Her abandonment of UCD marked an abiding characteristic of O'Faolain's life: constant desire to make a new start and reinvent herself when life grew stale.

Working for the BBC (1970–76), O'Faolain often acted as interviewer-producer on programmes about writers, and later on 'open access' television (assisting community groups who felt themselves aggrieved or ignored by the BBC to put across their own points of view). She taught occasional evening classes in Morley College, a London adult education institution.

O'Faolain became active in the women's movement (later declaring that she had 'always been for feminism since she understood what it was'), but initially thought of herself as working for other women rather than needing to reassess her own experiences. In her memoir, she describes unsatisfactory and intermittent relationships with the art critic Clement Greenberg and the writer and producer Harry Craig as evidence of her unreconstructed consciousness; when interviewed for a 2006 RTÉ documentary series, *Flesh and blood*, she apologised to the wives of all the married men with whom she had had affairs.

Rediscovering Ireland; broadcasting, journalism, Nell McCafferty O'Faolain occasionally covered Northern Ireland, and experienced anti-Irish hostility during the IRA bombing campaign in Britain, but was not particularly interested in Ireland. Her youthful idea of sophistication reacted against Irish puritan cultural nationalism, and she had looked to Frank Sinatra and to the romanticised Oxford of 1930s' novels; London made her more aware of English class distinctions and progressively less overawed by the glamour of the BBC, while her private life was increasingly chaotic. Rediscovery of Ireland began with her first visit to the annual Merriman summer school in Co. Clare in 1974, producing an enthusiasm which later became more critical. O'Faolain became a regular visitor to the Merriman, and took holidays in Ireland with siblings and their families. She returned to Dublin in 1977 to join Radio Telefís Éireann as a producer.

Through RTÉ magazine programmes such as *PM* and the cultural programme *Folio*, O'Faolain explored provincial Ireland on outside broadcast assignments, and joined a milieu of women journalists such as Nell McCafferty, Doireann Ní Bhriain and Marian Finucane, who wished to anatomise Irish society and promote coverage of

women's issues from a feminist perspective. She worked with them on such early 1980s programmes as *Women today* and the *Women's programme*, as well as the short-lived women's magazine *Status* (founded as a companion to the current affairs magazine *Magill*). She was also active in such groups as the Women's Political Association, and remarked that the widespread opposition to feminism in Ireland gave it a spikiness not so prominent in societies where it was simply recognised as good manners. She was an effective public speaker and communicator, her voice conveying both determination and a certain childlike vulnerability.

Her first years back in Dublin were also marked by continued heavy drinking, abuse of tranquillisers, and unhappy relationships; shortly after her father's death in 1980 she briefly checked herself into a psychiatric hospital. (Her mother's continuing alcoholism until her death in 1985 was also a burden.) O'Faolain's life was stabilised by a same-sex relationship with the activist Nell McCafferty, beginning in 1980 and lasting until 1994/5; McCafferty helped her to get her drinking under control, and to develop practical skills (O'Faolain learned to drive an automobile when she was 40, and to swim when she was 50; her recollections of McCafferty often involve their swimming together); they travelled widely and purchased property on mortgage. From the mid 1980s the relationship developed a variety of tensions leading to its eventual breakup. McCafferty later complained that O'Faolain's treatment of their relationship in her memoirs glossed over its romantic and physical side, and presented her as a parenthesis in O'Faolain's heterosexual life; their subsequent contacts were infrequent and fraught. O'Faolain also found solace in hillwalking in the Dublin mountains, in a circle of friendships, and in the company of animals. She was at once terrified of and attracted to solitude.

O'Faolain's experiences in RTÉ involved a certain amount of personal tension; although less republican than McCafferty, she disliked the hostility to republicanism and northern nationalism found among some RTÉ staff and other Irish intellectuals. In 1985 O'Faolain received a Jacobs award for producing *Plain tales*, a series of programmes in which women spoke directly to camera about their life experiences. Conor Brady, then assistant editor of the *Irish Times*, invited O'Faolain to leave RTÉ and become a columnist for the *Irish Times* after hearing her interviewed on radio by Gay Byrne.

O'Faolain's *Irish Times* columns avoided the impersonality of the conventional commentator and dealt with a wide variety of subjects which engaged her, with recurring references to the more disturbing and under-discussed features of Irish society. The personalised, uncompromising denunciations of the treatment of marginalised sections of Irish society and of the oppression of women worldwide, her combination of nostalgic anatomies of a changing Dublin and of the Irish countryside with denunciations of failure to recognise the poverty, repression and physical suffering that characterised everyday Irish life until very recently and continued to characterise large parts of the world, was regarded by some (including Mary Holland (qv)) as mawkish self-indulgence and by others as fearless truth-telling. This emotive

quality disguises at first glance the pithy sense of prose style and the analytical framework which underlie them, inspired by O'Faolain's academic training and by the French novelist Marcel Proust, who became an increasing favourite of O'Faolain as she got older and lonelier and spent more time in retrospection. She wrote as much to explain things for herself and work out her own ambivalences as for her readers. O'Faolain also acted as a roving commentator, visiting the scene of the 1994 Cregg Wood murders in east Clare, and spending six months in Northern Ireland in 1998 to explore the province as it moved towards the end of the troubles.

Remaining an *Irish Times* columnist until 2002, O'Faolain moved (c.2000) to the paper's Saturday magazine. She gave up the column because she felt the format of journalism was limiting and falsifying compared to longer forms, but missed 'the anchor' of regular deadlines, and wrote a column for the *Sunday Tribune* (c.2005–08). A selection of seventy-one columns of her journalism was published in Ireland as *A more complex truth* (2010) and in the USA as *A radiant life* (2011).

Fame and fortune: *Are you somebody?* The turning point in O'Faolain's life occurred in December 1995, when the Dublin publishing house New Island Books asked her to write an autobiographical introduction to a selection of her *Irish Times* columns. Deciding that this selection offered a chance to make sense of her own experiences and put them in permanent form for the few who might be interested, she underwent psychiatric counselling, took a creative writing course, and drew on family and personal papers to produce a two-hundred-page memoir, *Are you somebody?* (published with thirty-one selected columns in Ireland; republished in Britain, Australia and America as a standalone volume subtitled *The accidental memoir of a Dublin woman*, with an epilogue acknowledging the response to the volume; O'Faolain originally wanted to call the book *I'll take you home again, Kathleen*). With the assistance of an outspoken television appearance on Gay Byrne's *Late late show*, the book became an Irish bestseller, reprinted several times within five months. In America, it reached no. 1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. O'Faolain's unrestrained account of her experiences and emotional development ('the way I wrote about myself was more candid than any Irish woman had yet been, outside the more oblique forms of fiction and song and poetry' (p 59)) struck a chord with many readers; she received a wide variety of confessional mail, which she answered (and sometimes reprinted). Having expected an impoverished retirement of music, reading and alcohol, ending in an old people's home for the destitute, O'Faolain found herself affluent. Among other purchases, she bought a house in Dublin to accommodate an alcoholic younger brother who died a few years later.

She then received a million-dollar advance from a publisher for a novel, which she wrote while living in Manhattan, where she taught a course on famous Irish memoirs at Glucksman Ireland House at New York University while on indefinite leave from the *Irish Times*. She admired the American drive for reinvention in contrast to Irish fatalism, and sought physical and emotional rejuvenation in Manhattan. The novel, *My dream of you* (2001), depicts a middle-aged London Irish professional woman

coming to terms with Ireland through a love affair and an imaginative reconstruction of the scandalous famine-era Talbot divorce case (both echoing O'Faolain's own largely physical affair with a married truck driver in the late 1990s). The money from this novel became a deposit on a one-bedroom apartment to be built in a converted Manhattan warehouse, completed after delays caused by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and becoming a home away from home. An attempt at a second novel ran into prolonged writer's block. (O'Faolain's posthumous second novel, *Best love, Rosie* (2009), depicts a much-travelled, professional Irishwoman coming to terms with her murky Irish roots and settling down with the assistance of money earned by composing self-help reflections for American tea towels, while her frustrated elderly aunt is rejuvenated by escape to America.)

A second memoir, *Almost there: the onward journey of a Dublin woman* (2003), describes the composition, publication and reception of *Are you somebody?*, before developing into an account of the newly-affluent O'Faolain's attempt to reinvent herself in Manhattan in the late 1990s, including an account of her developing relationship with the New York lawyer John Low-Beer, the principal companion of her later years, whom she met in January 2002 after registering on the dating website Match.com as research for her novel. (They registered as domestic partners in 2003 but never married.) The book is noteworthy for O'Faolain's unsettling some of the elements of emotional closure presented in the earlier memoir (e.g., admitting that she had not in fact come to terms with her mother's memory), and for the shocking frankness with which O'Faolain describes her resentment of Low-Beer's eight-year-old daughter.

The story of Chicago May (2005), dedicated to Low-Beer, combines an imaginative exploration of the life of the criminal 'Chicago May' (Mary Ann) Duignan (qv), based on Duignan's memoir and other available documents, with an attempt to fit herself into America by following Duignan's footsteps. She concludes that, while willing to make every accommodation for Duignan (as an escapee from peasant patriarchy and a victim of male sexual exploitation), she cannot finally identify with her because of Duignan's lack of self-awareness; nor, by implication, can she call America home. It was awarded the 2006 Prix Femina Étranger.

Illness and death By February 2008 O'Faolain had reached a semi-detached *modus vivendi* with Low-Beer, had completed her second novel and was exploring further literary possibilities, while reporting on the 2008 US presidential election for Irish media. Then she was discovered to have tumours in her brain, lungs and other parts of her body. After initial treatment in New York, she returned to Ireland to say farewell to life; she accepted radiotherapy but not chemotherapy because she felt a slightly extended life not worth having when the imminence of death was taking much of the goodness from life. During her radiotherapy, O'Faolain recorded an interview with her old friend Marian Finucane, broadcast on RTÉ radio (12 April 2008), in which she spoke with considerable emotional frankness, conveying both conviction and vulnerability, about her diagnosis and her feelings

about the imminence of death, including blunt disavowal of any belief in an afterlife or the personal God of Christianity. (For many years O'Faolain combined hostility to catholic authority – she stated directly that catholic doctrines such as original sin and the immorality of extramarital sex had contributed to physical and sexual abuse by many clerics, and the general authoritarianism of the Ireland of her youth, and regularly compared Pope John Paul II and his associates to the misogynistic Taliban of Afghanistan – with a general subscription to a humanitarianism of Christian origin and an attachment to catholic ritual as one form of communal expression and acknowledgment of the numinous. Her decision in the last week of her life to have a catholic rather than a secular funeral did not imply any change in this outlook.) The interview produced a considerable response, generally commending her bravery and honesty (though some critics felt this did not require agreement with all her views).

In a last attempt to grasp as much of life as she could, O'Faolain holidayed with family members in Sicily and visited Berlin with a group of friends to hear music and see art. (She previously tended to avoid Berlin because through contact with Jewish friends and lovers, she associated it with the Holocaust.) She died at the Blackrock Hospice, Dublin, on 9 May 2008.

O'Faolain's outspokenness and identification with the figure of the neglected child resonated with the reassessment of the immediate Irish past that marked the 1990s and 2000s; her constant self-reinvention and self-questioning gave her writing a quality of open-endedness which enhanced its appeal for many readers, though like all memoirs her work should be recognised as a construct with its own elisions and emphases, rather than a transparent record. She was one of the defining commentators of *fin de siècle* Ireland.

O'Faolain was the subject of a film documentary, *Nuala: a life and death* (2011; dir. Patrick Farrelly and Kate O'Callaghan; produced and narrated by Marian Finucane). Hugo Hamilton's novel *Every single minute* (2014) is based on his experiences when accompanying O'Faolain to Berlin shortly before her death.

Nuala O'Faolain, *Are you somebody?: the life and times of Nuala O'Faolain* (1996); ead., *Almost there: the onward journey of a Dublin woman* (2003); Nell McCafferty, *Nell* (2004); Deirdre Brady, *Thank you for the days* (2005); *Daily Telegraph*, 11 May 2008; *Ir. Times*, 12 May 2008; 22 Feb. 2014; *Guardian*, 12, 14 May 2008; Nuala O'Faolain, *A more complex truth* (2010); John Waters, *Beyond consolation* (2010); Luke Dodd (ed.), *Marian Finucane: the Saturday interview, 2005–2011* (2011), 81–95; *Ir. Examiner*, 24 Feb. 2012; *Sunday Times*, 18 Mar. 2012; Mary Kenny, *Something of myself – and others: memories and reflections* (2012); www.nualadocumentary.com (accessed 31 Mar. 2014)

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