

REGIONAL AESTHETICS: MAPPING UK MEDIA CULTURES

Sam Hanna Bell and the ideology of place

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There can be few radio programmes that more completely express the idea of place than the features and documentaries of Sam Hanna Bell¹. Working at BBC Northern Ireland from 1945 to 1969 (and then in his retirement till the late 1980s) Bell not only pioneered the craft of radio features making, especially in his use of the words of ‘ordinary people’, he also produced programmes which powerfully evoked a highly specific sense of place and history. In the most troubled and divided part of the United Kingdom, however, any claims about history, place and culture are bound to contain political messages; no matter how unintended and Bell’s characterisation of ‘Ulster’ carried heavy ideological baggage. Bell’s radio output expressed a sense of Ulster as an historical and cultural entity rooted in centuries of history and the unchanging geography of Northern Ireland, a view that was inevitably of more comfort to the Protestant majority than the Catholic minority.

Both of Bell’s parents were from Northern Ireland although he was born in Scotland (in 1909) and raised in a Presbyterian² family. In 1918, following the death of his father, Bell and his family moved to the farm of his maternal grandmother in County Down, Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that his subsequent upbringing on the farm had a profound effect on his later work;

During the few years of childhood that I spent there I saw a pattern of rural life that had existed for three hundred years vanish under the impact of the motor bus and the tractor.
(Hanna Bell quoted in McMahon, 1999: 8)

¹ The term ‘features’ is here used to describe a creative style of factual programme which might include music, verse and drama as well as recorded sound and the voices of interviewees.

² Presbyterianism is a Scottish form of Protestantism influenced by Calvinism.

Bell's family then moved to Belfast in the early 1920s, he left school at the age of 14 to earn his living in a variety of not very well paid jobs while living the life of the autodidact and aspiring writer. By the start of the war, Bell was an established member of the Belfast literary scene based at the iconic non-sectarian cultural institution, the Linen Hall Library, which allowed both Protestants and Catholics to join. Other members of the group were W.R.Rodgers and John Boyd, both of whom were to make, like Bell himself, the transition to the BBC. The literary journal, *Lagan* was published in 1943 with Bell an important contributor and in the same year his first book *Summer Loanen and Stories* was published. *Lagan* was founded on a liberal and non-sectarian commitment to express the 'life and speech of the province' (McMahon, 1999:28) and this philosophy was to be deeply imbedded in Bell's approach to broadcasting. Hanna Bell's early writing was characteristic of what was to come; Sophia Hillan King discussing Bell's first two short stories wrote; 'Both draw on a deeply felt sense of place and on a knowledge of the importance of place and tradition in shaping the mind for good or ill' (1999, p.4).

BBC Northern Ireland (BBC N.I.) began broadcasting on 15 September 1924 to a population divided into a Protestant two-thirds and a Catholic one-third; most of the latter were expressly opposed to the very existence of Northern Ireland as a political entity divided from the south³ (Cathcart, 1984:1). In 1936 the BBC's Director of Regional Relations, Charles Siepmann wrote a report on BBC Northern Ireland that vividly portrayed the social divisions of the time, 'the bitterness of religious antagonism between Protestants and Catholics invades the life of the community at every point...' adding that the Northern Irish government was a 'loyalist dictatorship' (quoted in Cathcart, 1984:3). The strongly pro-unionist⁴ Station Director, George Marshall, made sure that BBC Northern Ireland broadcast in the interests of the Protestant majority (Cathcart, 1984:112). This bias included a ban on reporting anything about Southern Ireland ('Éire' from 1937), indeed when the evening news carried the results of the Gaelic games in 1946 this caused a furore in the Protestant community. In his

³ Ireland was partitioned in 1920, the Irish Free State, a predominantly Catholic south and west of Ireland and a Protestant dominated north.

⁴ The Protestant majority in Northern Ireland was 'unionist', favouring union with the rest of Britain.

convincing discussion of BBC regionalism pre-1953, Thomas Hajkowski describes how BBC N.I. helped maintain both a British identity, by providing programmes about Britain and British events, but also helped to construct an 'Ulster' identity, the preferred unionist term for Northern Ireland (2010:210).

The unpromising environment at BBC N.I. was to be the context of Sam Hanna Bell's new career as a radio features producer. In 1945, the celebrated Northern Irish poet and radio producer, Louis MacNeice, was looking for new writers and producers in the province. He found both Bell and W.R.Rodgers, taking the latter eventually back to BBC Features Department in London. An important aspect of Bell's appointment was that he was not answerable to the often partisan and illiberal minds in Belfast but to MacNeice himself in London. Another stroke of good fortune for Bell was the departure of Marshall and the appointment, in 1948, of the committed BBC regionalist, Andrew Stewart, as Controller Northern Ireland. And so the scene was set for this self-proclaimed 'Ulsterman' to write and produce radio features and documentaries for the next forty years, most of which expressed his powerful sense of Ulster as a cultural, historical and geographical entity.

The post-war BBC was committed to a policy of regional broadcasting following the more centralised war-time output. This policy was influenced partly by Siepmann's pre-war report on the regions and the commitment of people like Andrew Stewart, who had moved to Belfast after a spell as Programme Director for Scotland. Regionalism was further supported by the Beveridge Report on broadcasting in 1951 which recommended devolution. The view that energised regions would add to BBC output was supported by D.G.Bridson, the influential features producer who thought that because the regions were 'comparatively free from administrative interference' this would facilitate improvements in quality (quoted in Cranston, 1996:38). Siepmann himself had identified radio features as the most promising aspect of production in Northern Ireland and in 1945 Features Department reopened in Belfast with Sam Hanna Bell a key member of the team.

Before examining examples of Bell's programme making it is instructive to look at his writing and in particular his best-known novel, *December Bride* (1951). The novel is set in the early 1900s on a farm near the shore of Strangford Lough⁵. A mother and her thirty-year-old daughter, Sarah, come to live on the farm and the novel is the story of Sarah and her relationships with the two farmer's sons and eventual marriage to one of them. But, as Bell's biographer, Sean McMahon, explains, 'the most striking thing about the book is the realisation of place and community' (1999:75). For Bell the place in question was not the Protestant and unionist province of Northern Ireland but something ages older. *December Bride* includes reminders to the reader of 'earlier people' who inhabited the shores of the lough. Behind the farm is the 'rath' or fort, a term based on the Gaelic *ráth*; a bald man is called Moiley (also from the Gaelic *maol*, meaning smooth or bald). The old Gaelic words are joined by words from Scottish dialect to suggest a fusion of ancient and more recent influences in the culture of rural Ulster. For Bell, the lives of farmers were dominated by the 'primal force behind all their lives'; the land, the country year and its changing moods and insistent demands (McMahon, 1999:79). The strength of Bell's writing in *December Bride* is displayed most vividly when describing those primal forces,

At noon for an hour, an unearthly pearly light fell on the walls and fields, a light that pressed on the head and hurt the brain, and those who had to be out did so with averted heads, hurrying quickly from doorway to doorway. Then the baffled sun drew away and the countryside slid back again into dripping icy darkness.

Bell's radio output was characterised by this depiction of rural culture in particular as something rooted in a more ancient and more 'Irish' past. This celebration of local culture, but with ancient roots, would allow Bell to 'circumvent divisive religious and sectarian issues' (Franklin, 2009: 136). By constantly drawing attention to a shared past, Bell avoided more recent and indeed worsening social divisions.

⁵ This is the anglicised spelling of the Scots/Irish Gaelic word 'loch', meaning lake.

The method of capturing the voices of the people changed significantly in the post-war period. At first it was necessary to bring programme contributors to the BBC studios in Belfast, given the fairly blatant pro-unionist bias of the BBC this was far harder for Catholics than Protestants. Then, soon after 1945, the cumbersome mobile recording unit was introduced, which at least got producers, including and especially Bell, on the road. The recording unit, which Bell drove around in a sturdy Humber car, served to help democratise BBC output, as Bell said, 'Up to this time the working class voice had never been heard in Broadcasting House, Belfast' (quoted in Loughrey, 1996: 69). The recordings were hardly spontaneous but they were a huge improvement on what had gone before,

Sam Bell went to Queen's Island and to every glen in the Sperrins with his recording machine. By contemporary broadcasting standards, that material was rigidly scripted and stilted but in its time it was wonderfully innovative and enriching (Loughrey, 1996:70).

Tape recorders arrived at the BBC in the early 1950s and these of course added enormously to the task of capturing working class voices. As Ieuan Franklin has pointed out, in doing this Bell joined the pioneering work of other early radio interviewers inspired by the search for authentic working class speech, Denis Mitchell and Charles Parker (Franklin, 2009:114).

The reality of Bell's first productions is rather less inspiring than might be expected from such a talented and influential figure. Bell had clear aspirations, to gather 'the voices of men and women describing their daily work, their recreations, their hopes and troubles...' (Cathcart, 1984:154). Series like *Country Magazine* (1949-1954), *Within Our Province* (1949-1953) and *Country Profile* (1949-1953) all featured the voices of the people but may have suffered from a folksy nostalgia,

The new era was heralded by a schedule packed with nostalgia for a pre-war lyricism; for an imagined Northern Ireland not for the real one (Cranston, 1996: 40).

Motivated by his concern about the loss of a rural culture, including the language of country people and the occupations they followed and their superstitions and customs, Bell embarked on an almost desperate attempt to record a dying way of life. *Country Magazine* used the magazine format to incorporate news, gossip, song, agricultural tips and above all the voices of ‘ordinary people’ (McMahon, 1999:49). *Within Our Province* included stories about apple growing, rope making, housing and Tuberculosis while *Country Profile* featured rural occupations; the dress maker, the country solicitor. The suggestion in all of these early series was of a largely rural population rooted in their often isolated communities engaged in traditional occupations and governed not so much by the church or chapel but the more ancient rhythms of the weather and the land.

A rather more serious, even anthropological, development in Bell’s programme making was in the production of *Fairy Faith* (March – April 1952). Responding to the criticism that the BBC was more interested in the folklore and music of the south, Andrew Stewart tasked the folklorist, Michael J. Murphy and Sam Hanna Bell to go in search of the ‘heroic tales and myths of Ulster’ (Cathcart, 1984:155). Unable to find what Stewart wanted, Ball and Murphy instead offered to make a series of programmes on that well-known aspect of Irish culture, belief in the ‘wee folk’ or fairies. A series later described as ‘the most important work in Irish Folklore in modern times’ (member of the Irish Folk Lore Commission quoted in Cathcart, 1984:155). Bell was motivated in much of his radio writing and production by a commitment to capturing a vanishing and mysterious rural culture, and the tales of fiddle-playing, horse-riding and milk-spoiling fairies perfectly captured that sense of an enchanted world. It is tempting to observe that fairies were hardly symbols of Protestant unionism and indeed a reminder of a shared culture with that other land of fairies and leprechauns, Southern Ireland.

Sam Hannah Bell’s radio career can usefully be divided into his work as a jobbing series producer, putting in long hours on the road to satisfy the constant demand for the tales of local people, and his work as the writer and producer of individual programmes. It is in the latter that Bell’s originality and powerful expression of Ulster as a cultural and geographical entity can be heard. To mark BBC Northern Ireland’s twenty-fifth

anniversary, Bell wrote and produced what is probably his most famous radio feature, *This is Northern Ireland: An Ulster Journey*, first broadcast on 26 October 1949 and re-broadcast on the BBC Home service and the General Overseas Service. Although the only available recording outside Northern Ireland in the BBC Sound Archive is of very poor quality, the full script has been published in *A Salute From the Banderol: the selected writings of Sam Hanna Bell* (Hanna Bell, F. 2009) and this source is the basis for the analysis which follows⁶. The programme is in many ways a classic radio feature in the tradition established by D.G.Bridson, Louis MacNeice and others, although without the use of verse as the main narrative vehicle. Music, drama, poetry and actuality are used throughout and Franklin is right that the programme marks an ‘interstitial’ point in features production (2009:122) because of the combination of a classic feature with the voices of ‘ordinary people’, including the fishing-boat skipper, the brickworks manager, the farmer and the shirt-maker.

The feature begins with an important statement of intention,

1ST NARRATOR: In this journey the symbols of our map will not represent bridge, waterway and road, but occupation, speech and custom. Its contours will not show the heights and hollows of rock on rock, but the overflowing and mingling of tradition.

Ladies and Gentlemen, *This is Northern Ireland*.

2ND NARRATOR: This is our map. Here, see, is the scalloped Border that binds our Province. Half of it over mountains, loughs and farmland: half under cliffs, over strands, through and sludge of busy ports. Along the coast of Down, under the feet of Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh, over the seaward heads of Derry and Antrim, until it meets and clasps in the city of Belfast.

These striking words deserve some analysis. The map which the listener will encounter is a cultural and social one in which traditions mingle and overflow. So the emphasis

⁶ It should be noted that the study of radio programmes based on transcripts lacks an appreciation of their specifically sonic quality; this is particularly true of radio features with their often diverse range of sounds.

will be on how the past shapes the present, an abiding theme in Bell's radio and other work (and especially *December Bride*). But there is also a geographical map which includes the romantic features of mountain and lough and the six named counties of Ulster. These are described as 'clasped' together and so separated from the rest of the island of Ireland. In reality this is a curious gloss on history and geography because the 1920 partition of six counties was not traditional or ancient at all. The historic entity of Ulster consisted of Northern Ireland but also the counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan which, following partition, existed in Southern Ireland. Bell's 'clasped' province had none of the historic lineage he suggests, it was a political fix dating back a mere 30 years.

Running throughout *This is Northern Ireland* is the constant affirmation of the ancient character of Ulster. So 'it was the Norsemen who gave Strangford Lough its modern name' and 'at the Slaney river, near the mouth of the lough, St Patrick landed on his return to Ireland, 1,500 years ago' and perhaps most graphically,

Great mountainsides peopled by the sheep, the hare and hooded crow. Yet every ridge and boulder and mist-filled hollow has a name, for men and women lived and worked here a thousand years.

Another striking characteristic of the programme, and indeed of much of Bell's radio output, is attention to language and dialect. The old language is of course bound up with the history of the ancient places. Bell calls the mountains of Mourne, 'the kingdom of Mourne',

In it are all the ancient appurtenances of a kingdom. A rhythm of speech, a mythology, a pattern of living laid down on its granite sides.

Language is strongly associated with history but also with place and here Bell allows his more liberal anti-unionism to show, a genuine warmth towards those who live beyond the borders of Ulster,

As the texture of the land changes from richness to sparseness, so, as it travels South, speech changes from dryness and an economy of words to the cadence and idiom of an older tongue, till talk and greeting and story mingle and merge into the voices of Louth and Southern Ireland.

Similarly, when mentioning the sectarian divide he comments that ‘it may be only the thickness of a page of Indian paper that divides us’.

Thomas Hajkowski’s judgement of *This is Northern Ireland* is partly correct,

Bell’s implicit argument in *This is Northern Ireland* is that the people of Northern Ireland have more in common with each other than with Catholics or Protestants in Eire, by virtue of their shared Ulsterness (2010: 219).

The emphasis on shared culture, history and geography is indeed non-sectarian despite the Protestant connotations of ‘Ulster’, but this is hardly a unionist text, no sense at all of Britishness, and the constant references to ancient ways would surely have suggested an Ireland before religious division, before partition? There are some decidedly mixed messages in *This is Northern Ireland* about Ulster as a unique, historic place which seem to reflect confusion within the Protestant community. One of the fascinations of this canonic feature is the expression of this confusion, of Ulster as having both a shared Irishness with the south but also fundamentally different from the south in its ‘clasped’ autonomy.

Made almost exactly a year later, *Raithlin Island* was broadcast on 6 October 1950 and written and produced by Hanna Bell. As a radio programme it is remarkably different from the classic artificiality of *This is Northern Ireland*. The programme is about a small island between Ireland and Scotland, steeped in history and culturally distinct; perfect material for Sam Hanna Bell and his approach could be described as revolutionary. The foundation of the programme is not, as in the traditional feature, the script, but the (apparently unscripted) voices of the inhabitants of the island interviewed by the presenter, Graham Roberts. This is something far closer to a radio documentary, a more

journalistic approach but one that, like *This is Northern Ireland*, creates a powerful sense of place. We hear a farmer interviewed, then a man talking about a 'sweat room', a woman publican, the sound of men talking and then one of them tells a story. A lobster fisherman complains he has only caught eight lobsters and then we hear the voice of the district nurse. The interviews are linked together by Bell's typically lyrical scripted commentary, 'I saw a rock like a gigantic wedding cake', 'the road rambles through a bracelet of tiny loughs' and we hear details of the island's history (the 'hill of screams' where women saw their menfolk slaughtered by the Campbells) culminating in the eccentricity of model yachting, a very popular pastime on the island.

Much of Bell's subsequent work as a radio producer and writer employed the techniques and form of *Raithlin Island* while further developing Bell's intense interest in a dying Ulster culture. *Memories of Belfast Shipyard Workers* (25 January 1953) included the voices of workers describing the hierarchies and symbolic clothing of men in the early twentieth century. The shipyard was full of men in different hats which indicated their trade and seniority, a badge of office. Some men wore frock coats, but joiners wore laundered white aprons. A riveter wore a black silk scarf and moleskin trousers. These traditions were dying out but Bell evoked through the memories of workers an image of urban Belfast with a rich and colourful working men's culture.

Similarly, *Hired and Bound* (3 March 1954) included stories of the old fairs of Northern Ireland where 'farm servants' were hired. Alongside the recorded sounds of a fair (sheep, a man singing) Bell is heard interviewing a number of different people about their experiences and memories. As has already been suggested, Bell's work could often be nostalgic, an undoubted weakness in his programmes, but *Hired and bound* is a good example of a more realistic and at times grim view of old rural Northern Ireland. One speaker described the farm servant system as 'a second edition to slavery' and there is an emphasis on the extreme poverty and harsh conditions of the workers. Workers were contracted for a period of time and it was almost impossible to leave before the end. The fairs were also remarkably rich in terms of the variety of traders and performers; acrobats, a man with a bear, fortune tellers and foot doctors were all present. The crowds

who attended frequently dressed up for the occasion wearing suits or shawls and there was much singing and dancing. There were also fights at the hiring fairs and the dealers often carried sticks to defend themselves.

Sam Hanna Bell's work as a producer of other writer's scripts also allowed him to explore Northern Irish culture and a sense of place. A brilliant example of this is *The Return Room*, written in verse by W.R.Rodgers (23 December 1955). This feature describes Rodgers' Belfast childhood and the stylised, poetic narrative is strongly reminiscent of the work of his friend, Dylan Thomas. The feature combines dramatic performance with music and sound effects but is mainly verse narrative. Belfast is described as a city pulsating with characters (Uncle Jacob, Mr Jelly Belly and Mrs Bitter Cup) around whom children skip and sing. The Belfast street is the programme's focal point and the sounds of the street are described; a street preacher forecasts doom, 'ragamuffins' sing and beg and we hear Mr Ezekiel Knight, the undertaker, 'a funeral in our street was a state occasion'. Religion is also a central theme in *The Return Room* but the references (from a Protestant perspective) are affectionate and largely humorous; 'we ignored Good Friday as being too close to Rome'; Sunday was 'the longest day of week, every minute had mildew on it' and 'in the street, Mrs Mulligan talking to her 12 children' on discovering that one had stolen a sixpence tells them to 'get down on your knees and pray'. Some of the sharpest writing, however, is reserved for the Protestants; Rodgers refers to his mother's 'sad little Presbyterian mouth' and the children sing with 'their bitter old Puritan tongues'. In Rodgers' account of mid twentieth century Belfast, religious divide is present but simply adds to the colour and gaiety of a child's world. As the producer, Hanna Bell would have relished the task of evoking Belfast as a culturally diverse and richly textured urban space.

It would be a serious mistake to denigrate Sam Hannah Bell's representation and celebration of Ulster as simply part of a Protestant, unionist ideology and that is certainly not suggested here. By mapping the geography, history and culture of Ulster, Bell is certainly demarcating the north from the south, a critically important component of

unionist ideology, but Bell's Ulster is also vividly different from the rest of Britain. Martin McLoone in his discussion of the early BBC N.I. has written of the 'degree of confusion over what it was the unionists (...) wanted in terms of more acceptable representations of their Ulster identity' (1996:27). On the one hand there was a desire to acknowledge Ulster as an alternative form of 'Irishness' to that promoted by the South but 'On the other hand, there was also a desire for the Britishness of Ulster to be recognised as no different to the Britishness of London...' (1996:27). Those who wanted Ulster to look as much like London as possible would have been deeply disappointed by Bell's hyper-regional account of Northern Ireland as a unique cultural and historical entity but one which was frequently coloured by Gaelic history, customs and words; not to mention Gaelic belief in the 'wee folk'.

Hanna Bell's legacy is of considerable interest to radio scholars as he moved with some speed through the different forms of post-war factual broadcasting; from the early magazines programmes to the more artificial classic radio features and then to the more relaxed interview-based documentaries. But his significance is far greater than that as he is now remembered principally as a novelist and especially the author of *December Bride*. Driving Hanna Bell's literary and broadcasting career was his love of the land and its dying culture in which he saw the hope of peace for his troubled home. Hence his powerful evocation of Ulster as a unique and ancient place; a well-intentioned if at times naïve representation of Northern Ireland.

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Outside broadcast recording of BBC Northern Ireland's *It's a Brave Step*, c.1948.