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Paul Delaney, *Seán O’Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s*

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REFERENCES

Paul DELANEY, *Seán O’Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s*, Sallins, Irish Academic Press, 2014, XI + 280 p., ISBN 978 0 7165 3266 8.

- 1 Seán O’Faoláin is a writer whose reputation had declined considerably even during the course of his own lifetime. By his death in 1990 O’Faoláin’s status as an artist in Ireland was reduced and this is testified to by the fact that the most important critical work on his fiction remained Maurice Harmon’s *Sean O’Faolain: A Critical Introduction* first published in 1966, followed much later by Harmon’s biography *Sean O’Faolain: A Life* published in 1994. Interest in O’Faoláin’s work during the centenary of his birth in 2000 saw the publication of two more significant studies in Marie Arndt’s *A Critical Study of Seán O’Faoláin’s Life and Works* and a conference proceeding from Turin titled *Seán O’Faoláin: a Centenary Celebration*, both published in 2001. This is why Paul Delaney’s *Seán O’Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s* makes a welcome contribution to the sparsely populated field of O’Faoláin studies. This monograph looks to O’Faoláin’s writing during the 1930s, a decade in which he published several biographies of important Irish political figures as well as two collections of short stories and two novels. Delaney analyses both the biographies and the fiction and gives equal weighting to the two, although O’Faoláin himself thought little of his biographical work, writing to Sean O’Casey that his biographies for the *Sunday Chronicle* were “very easy” and “done in a few hours”. To Delaney’s credit, he does tease out some of the wider political implications for O’Faoláin through a comparative analysis of his two biographies of Eamon De Valera. For example, Delaney rightly points to O’Faoláin’s pains to identify himself as a Republican in both, ostensibly to ‘confirm his suitability as a biographer’, but also as an acknowledgment of his idealism in a “commitment to a certain strand of Republicanism”, as was befitting of a man who took up arms against the British and

whose wife had been shot by the Black and Tans. Delaney devotes the second half of his book to O'Faoláin's fiction during the decade and he offers some interesting insight into these texts, from the intergenerational strife of *A Nest of Simple Folk* to the Faustian overtones of *Bird Alone*, Delaney is good at demonstrating the breadth of O'Faoláin's talent. Where the book really excels is in uncovering some of the lesser known or forgotten writings of O'Faoláin, such as his early writings for *The Irish Statesman* and *Sinn Féin*, showing us some of the complexity of his thinking during this period and the range of issues with which he was engaged, from the Irish language to his review work. Delaney's work is a timely addition to O'Faoláin studies. With Kelly Matthew's work on *The Bell* published in 2014 and two more monographs due on O'Faoláin in 2015, this is an area set to grow in the coming years.

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