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## Thomas Bell: Pittsburgh Radial

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On January 17, 1961, in Santa Cruz, California, a man named Thomas Bell died from a protracted case of terminal Liver cancer. <sup>1</sup> It had taken two years for the disease to run its course. Bell had moved to Santa Cruz from New York with his wife in 1955 and opened a small stationary store. Living in relative obscurity, his neighbors and acquaintances were probably shocked to discover that he had been a writer who had authored six novels and a wealth of short stories. Even more surprising would have been the fact that Bell was not his real name. <sup>2</sup>

Born and raised in the Pittsburgh-area community of Munhall Hollow, Bell's real name was Adalbert Thomas Belejcek. He was Slovak and although an atheist as an adult, he was probably raised a Byzantine-Rite Catholic. <sup>3</sup> Orphaned as a teenager due to his father's and mother's succumbing to Tuberculosis early in their lives, Bell made his way to New York when he was nineteen. He had previously worked in the steel industry, and as an apprentice machinist. In terms of his education, Bell was

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<sup>1</sup> "Thomas Bell Dies; Novelist Was 56" *The New York Times*, January 18, 1961, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Berko, "Thomas Bell (1903-1961) Slovak-American Novelist, *Slovak Studies*, XV, p. 143

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

primarily self-taught and was a voracious reader. <sup>4</sup> Eventually landing a job in a bookstore, Bell published his first novel in 1930 at the age of twenty-seven. <sup>5</sup> Entitled *The Breed of Basil*, it was primarily a fantasy set in Illyria during a period that reviewer Robert M. McBride characterized as "undated". <sup>6</sup> Although it had been nicely received by the critics, it did not sell well. <sup>7</sup> Although this was Bell's first book, its publication did not mark his entry into the literary field. He had written a column for Braddock, PA's *Daily News-Herald* using Thomas Bell as a penname. <sup>8</sup> Although he claimed he used the name because it was easier for readers to understand than Belejcak, there were probably other motives at work as well. He started writing while still in Pittsburgh and considering the city's social and political realities at the time, some discretion on his part would have been prudent. Secondly, anti-Slovak prejudice was rampant. That was a point that Bell made in at least two of his books: *Out of this Furnace* and *There Comes a Time*. <sup>9</sup> Stated

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-144.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 144

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. McBride, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, May 17, 1930, p. 104; See Also Thomas Bell, *The Breed of Basil* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1930). This novel can be downloaded from the Hathi Trust website.

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. McBride, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, May 17, 1930, p. 104; Guy Holt "Fledgling Fiction", *The Bookman*, August 1930, 571; Berko, 144.

<sup>8</sup> Berko, p.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Lubove, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh, Volume 1* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), p. 12; Thomas Bell, *Out of this Furnace* (Boston:

simply "Bell" sounded more American than "Belejcak" and would presumably sell better.

Sadly, Bell as an author appears to have been generally forgotten today. If he is remembered it is for *Out of this Furnace*. Originally published in 1941 by Little, Brown, it has been republished by the University of Pittsburgh Press, beginning in 1976. It is a beautiful story in many ways, and certainly autobiographical, yet it does not offer a full insight into Bell's worldview, especially his politics.

Certainly, it would come as no surprise that Bell disdained *l'assés-faire* capitalism and the low-wage economy it produced. This system was endemic not only in Pittsburgh but throughout south-western Pennsylvania during Bell's youth. Thus, while *Out of this Furnace* endorses collective bargaining, the book makes no mention of doing away with the capitalist system. Yet, Bell belonged to several organizations that were considered Communist fronts, such as the League of American Writers, that were hostile to that system. However, there was an event that stood out above all his other memberships: his association with the

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Little, Brown, 1941; Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), pp. 400 - 401. (Author's note, the slur "hunky" which was used for anyone of eastern European heritage is used throughout this book); Thomas Bell, *There Comes a Time* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1946. P. 10. It should be noted that in *There Comes a Time* Bell simply states that the book's main character, Joel Pane, was Slovak, and had changed his name from Panek to Pane when he came to New York.

Scientific and Cultural Conference on World Peace.<sup>10</sup> Held at the Waldorf-Astoria on March 27-30, 1949, it was vehemently anti-American and lauded the Soviet Union as a peace-loving, pacific nation. While Bell did not present a paper at the meeting, he did serve as one of the meeting's sponsors and helped to edit its proceedings volume, entitled *Speaking of Peace*, which featured a short biographical sketch about him.<sup>11</sup>

Considering the meeting's tenor and overall thrust, the question must be asked if Bell was a Communist. It is hard to imagine a freethinker like Bell submitting himself to Stalinist discipline. In addition, if he was a Communist, why wasn't he investigated? This paper seeks to look at these issues and offer some explanations.

### **Background**

Thomas Bell is an enigma in many ways. Unlike other novelists and writers of note, it appears that no effort was made to preserve his correspondence. Nor are there any archival collections of his private papers. Therefore, gaining an immediate insight or knowledge about his political views is

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel S. Gillmor, ed. *Speaking of Peace An Edited Report of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, New York, March 25, 26, and 27, 1949 Under the auspice of the National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions* (New York: The National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions, 1949), p. vi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi,

incredibly difficult, if not impossible. Added to this is the fact that only one biographical piece was ever written about him. It was entitled "Thomas Bell: Slovak-American Novelist" and appeared in the 1975 edition of *Slovak Studies* published by the Slovak Institute in Rome. While providing useful information about Bell's life, it was silent about his political views.<sup>12</sup> So too were the various review/memorial pieces that came out with publication of *In the Midst of Life*, which was published after he died. Although the book consists of Bell's reflections about his illness and impending death, there are places where the book is autobiographical, thereby serving as a testament and memoir. But even here, Bell, while offering some clues, does not come out and say whether he was a Communist or fellow traveler. About the only article that addresses the matter directly was a review/obituary piece that appeared in *The Militant*, which is Trotskyist in orientation.<sup>13</sup> In it, the author states that Bell should be remembered and celebrated because he was "one of us."<sup>14</sup> However, considering the source, the statement can hardly be considered authoritative.

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<sup>12</sup> See J.F. Berko, "Thomas Bell (1903-1961). Slovak-American Novelist", *Slovak Studies*, XV, 1975, pp. 143-158

<sup>13</sup> William F. Ward, "A Remarkable Socialist Testament", *The Militant*, February 5, 1962, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Regarding Bell's background and early life in Pittsburgh, it is no exaggeration to say that he was raised in poverty. As a general unskilled laborer in a steel mill, Bell's father, Michael Belejcak, earned a daily wage of roughly \$1.41 (\$9.90 a week) for a twelve-hour shift, working seven days a week.<sup>15</sup> It should also be added that work in the mills was not only dangerous, but physically demanding due to the hot work environment.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the central issue for Bell's family and others like them was not quality of life but simple survival. This grim point was laid out by social-worker Margaret F. Byington in her book *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town*.<sup>17</sup> Byington also wrote a series of articles on the subject for a professional journal in her field entitled *Charities and the Commons*. Both the book and the articles were published in 1909 and grew out of the Pittsburgh Survey that was conducted by the Russel Sage Foundation. What Byington found was an industrial

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<sup>15</sup> John Andrews Fitch, "The Steel Industry and the Labor Problem," *Charities and the Commons*, March 6, 1909, pp. 1079 - 1086; Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Milltown* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, MCMX), p. 152

<sup>16</sup> Fitch, pp. 1080-1082.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Milltown*, see Chapter XI, "Family Life of the Slavs", pp. 145-157. It should be noted that this volume was reprinted and available from the University of Pittsburgh Press. The edition cited here is the original and was downloaded as a PDF from the Archive.com website. As were the editions of *Charities and Commons* cited here.

community marked by poor housing and unsanitary living conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Bell was born and raised in Munhall, PA, which is close to Homestead. In her research, Byington described the homes occupied by unskilled steel workers like Michael Belejcek as little better than slums. Not only that, the homes lacked running water, except for a cold water tap or pump located in the courtyard of each building section. Bathroom facilities consisted of a set of outdoor privies.<sup>19</sup> Since these homes and facilities were closely located to the Monongahela River, they contributed to Pittsburgh's chronic Typhoid problem. According to Frank E. Wing, superintendent of Chicago's Tuberculosis Institute, Pittsburgh's drinking water supply had been contaminated for years, leading to a thirty-five-year struggle with the disease.<sup>20</sup> With this, between 1883 and 1908, there was a total of 54,857 reported Typhoid cases in Pittsburgh, resulting in 8,149 deaths. A good portion of these cases were concentrated in the Slavic districts located near the

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret F. Byington "The Mill Town Courts and Their Lodgers", *Charities and the Commons*, February 6, 1909, pp. 913-914,

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 914-915.

<sup>20</sup> Frank E. Wing, "Thirty-Five Years of Typhoid: The Fever's Economic Cost to Pittsburgh and the Long Fight for Pure Water", *Charities and the Commons*, February 6, 1909, pp. 923-925

Monongahela in what were then Wards 25, 26, and 27.<sup>21</sup> This roughly corresponds to where Bell grew up. As it is, while describing a small stream that ran through Bell's neighborhood, Munhall Hollow, Byington characterized it as an open drain and an affront to public health.<sup>22</sup> Bell, for his part, makes several references to this situation when writing about his childhood, making pointed references to using the privy as a boy and to the "ramshackle" house where he and his family resided.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from the stark economic conditions Bell experienced, Pittsburgh's political scene, as with that of the rest of southwestern Pennsylvania, was equally grim. Essentially, what existed in the region at that time was a regime marked by universal disempowerment, intimidation, and corporate hegemony. Stated simply, the Pittsburgh of Bell's youth was the largest company town in America.<sup>24</sup> This system dated from 1892 when

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 915-917.

<sup>22</sup> Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Bell, *In the Midst of Life* (New York: Anthenium, 1961), p 73, p. 254.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on this is extensive. A few representative citations are listed here: Arthur Garfield Hays, *Let Freedom Ring* (New York: Horace Liverlight Inc., 1928), p. 93ff; Elizabeth Ricketts, "The Struggle for Free Speech and Unionization in the Coal Fields: The Free Speech Case of Vintondale, Pennsylvania," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 122 No 4 (October 1998), 319-328; Jerimiah Patrick Shalloo, *Private Police: With Special Reference to Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: The Graduate School of the University of Pennsylvania, 1933), p. 58ff; Richard P. Mulcahy, "Musmanno's Fury" *Western Pennsylvania Magazine*, Winter 2012-13, pp. 44-57; Frederick Woltman and Samuel L. Nunn "Cossacks", *The American Mercury*, December 1928, pp. 399-406.



Carnegie Steel defeated and broke its union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, during the Homestead strike and remained in place until it was upended by the New Deal. During this era the company was like God - unseen in many ways, but all-knowing, all seeing, and omniscient. <sup>25</sup> Bell describes this regime in *Out of This Furnace*. In one example, a main character, Djuro Kracha owns a small grocery store and places a Bryan poster in its window during the election of 1896. However, he is advised by certain people connected with the company to take the poster down. <sup>26</sup>

As it was, the lack of freedom was endemic across southwestern Pennsylvania during this period where many communities, especially mining towns, functioned as miniature police-states. Many mining towns were not incorporated at this time and were thereby not recognized as true municipalities under Pennsylvania law, therefore lacking the ability their own police forces. Here coal companies filled the void by using the Coal and Iron Police (C&IP). The C&IP had been established in 1866 and were uniformed policemen who worked for the coal companies but having police

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<sup>25</sup> John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 207 - 220)

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Bell, *Out of this Furnace*, pp. 65-66.

commissions issued by the state.<sup>27</sup> Because of this, these people had the same authority to use deadly force as municipal policemen, county sheriffs, state police, and constables. The force was manned, according to Pennsylvania State Supreme Court Justice Michael A. Musmanno, by the dregs of society and were used to enforce corporate hegemony.<sup>28</sup> A good case in point was Vintondale, PA. Visited in 1922 by civil liberties attorney Arthur Garfield Hays, the town functioned as if the Bills of Rights contained in both the Federal and Pennsylvania State Constitutions had been suspended and martial law imposed.<sup>29</sup> A good example was that during the steel strike covered below, strike meetings were banned. However, one place where strikers could meet was at a Catholic church in Braddock, PA. Hearing of this, local corporate authorities threatened the priest as well as his church. However, the priest refused to be intimidated, defied the steel companies, forcing them to back down.<sup>30</sup>

Even more egregious was the murder of labor organizer Fannie Mae Sellens in 1919 by an Allegheny County deputy

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<sup>27</sup> Shalloo, pp. 58-62.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Al Musmanno, *Verdict! The Adventures of the Young Lawyer in the Brown Suit* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 119

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Garfield Hays, *Let Freedom Ring* (New York: Horace Liverlight Inc., 1928), p. 93ff

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Trachtenberg and Benjamin Glassberg, eds. *The American Labor Year Book, 1921-1922* (New York: The Rand School of Social Science, 1922), p. 192.

sheriff.<sup>31</sup> The slaying took place against a backdrop of anti-labor violence that had hit the Pittsburgh area due an effort organize United State Steel mounted by William Z. Foster on behalf of the American Federation of Labor. A coroner's jury was convened shortly after the killing and resulted in the deputy's acquittal.<sup>32</sup> Although he was tried two years later for murder by the Allegheny Court of Common Pleas, the accused was again acquitted due to a combination of too much time having passed and the unreliability of eye-witness testimony. For his part, Foster wrote about the slaying in his book *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons*.<sup>33</sup> Not long after Foster joined the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and eventually became its head.

Ironically, there was at least one apologist for this system that admitted that this system violated sacred American principles of individual freedom. The writer insisted, however, that such measures were necessary to protect employees from being harassed and pressured by labor organizers. In this way,

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<sup>31</sup> "Woman Organizer Killed in Riot: Mrs. Sellins Riot Victim was Mutilated" *The New York Times*, October 17, 1919, p. 6

<sup>32</sup> *Coroner's Jury Verdict*, dated September 26, 1919. The Jury incorrectly stated that the Deputy acted in self-defense, and deplored Bolsheviks who were agitating "UnAmericans [sic] and uneducated aliens". This document can be downloaded from the following address:  
[exhibit.library.pitt.edu/labor\\_legacy/Sellins.html](http://exhibit.library.pitt.edu/labor_legacy/Sellins.html)

<sup>33</sup> William Z Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons* (New York: Da Capo Press, Reprint Edition, 1971), pp. 146-150)

the system was designed to protect the single greatest freedom of all - the right of a person to make an individual contract with his or her employer.

In addition to all of this, there was the matter of the ethnic prejudice and discrimination that was heaped upon Pittsburgh's Slavic residents. Use of the term "Hunky" was pervasive in the city at this time, and like any other slur, it was meant to dehumanize, as well as to rob people of any sense of agency or empowerment. The Hunky was regarded as stupid and fit only to do the physically demanding work of an unskilled steel hand. If he dared to fight back, an iron fist would be used to put him in his place. This was a major sore spot for Bell and appeared in at least two of his books: *Out of this Furnace* and *There Comes A Time*. In *Out of This Furnace*, Bell laments that Slovaks were not allowed and were discouraged from expressing any pride in their ethnic identity. Later in the novel, a main character named Dobie has a confrontation with a company official for calling him a "dumb Hunky son-of-bitch" and force the official to back down with an implied threat of bodily harm. <sup>34</sup> In *There Comes A Time* a New York bank teller, changes his Slovak name to Joel Pane, thereby keeping his ethnicity a

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<sup>34</sup> Bell, *Out of This Furnace*, pp. 400-401; Bell, *There Comes a Time*, p. 10.

secret and presumably making himself more marketable with an Anglo-Saxon surname.

Adding all of this up, based upon his life experiences, Bell had no reason to support the capitalist system. Moreover, it is arguable that as a result of that experience, he may have regarded the American legacy of freedom as a joke. Not only was life in south-western Pennsylvania manifestly unfree, it was also marked by corruption. This was outlined by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1928.<sup>35</sup> Among the abuses it cited was an anti-labor Common Pleas Court judge who ruled consistently against striking miners while he was a major stockholder with the coal company in question.<sup>36</sup> Years later, commenting at the end of this life, Bell wrote off American capitalism as wasteful and inefficient and was confident that its collapse was imminent.<sup>37</sup>

### **Writings**

Bell left Pittsburgh in 1922 at the age of eighteen. He had worked in the steel industry, and as an apprentice machinist. He would even do a turn as a merchant sailor. As mentioned above,

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<sup>35</sup> See *The Shame of Pennsylvania* (New York: The American Civil Liberties Union, 1928)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Bell, *In the Midst of Life*, p.

he published his novel, *The Breed of Basil*, in 1930. His second novel, entitled *The Second Prince*, was published in 1935. Leaving fantasy behind, Bell relates a story about a journalist from a wealthy family who decides to learn about work in basic industry firsthand by posing as an ordinary laborer. During this odyssey, the journalist experiences all the injustices and frustrations associated with industrial life.<sup>38</sup>

However, it was not until the publication of his third novel, *All Brides are Beautiful*, in 1936 that Bell hit his stride. Set in New York in the middle 1930s, the book deals with the struggles of a newly wed couple coping with the Depression, unemployment, and the vicissitudes of daily life.<sup>39</sup> The book's main character is named Peter Cummings, and is originally from an unnamed small town 40 miles south of Pittsburgh.<sup>40</sup> He is a machinist who is artistically talented.<sup>41</sup> He is also a Communist and reads *The Daily Worker*.<sup>42</sup> There are times when Peter wonders about the Capitalist system and why people just roll over and take whatever abuse it hands them. However, Peter's ruminations

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<sup>38</sup> E.C. Beckworth, "A Modern Quest" *The New York Times*, April 14, 1935, Book Review Section, pp. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> See Thomas Bell, *All Brides are Beautiful* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936)

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp, 15-16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

about the lack of class consciousness and cohesion on the parts of individual working people are far and few between. Thus, the book lacks any sort of ham-fisted ideological didacticism. In addition, while Peter Cummings may be a proletarian hero, he is by no means a would-be philosopher-king in chains. He is simply a good and decent man trying to make ends meet as best as he can.

His wife, Mary, works in a bookstore, and suddenly becomes the family breadwinner when Peter loses his job a month after they are married. In a way, this was art imitating life, since Marie, Bell's wife, worked while Bell remained home writing and doing household duties. In the story, Mary secures Peter a chance to do some paid illustrating for her employer. The bookstore owner has managed to get his hands on a piece of classic literature that is erotically themed and needs pictures to round it out. While Mary's employer operates what was then considered a legitimate bookstore, the business is a front for how he truly makes his money - pornography. Unfortunately for Peter, just as he is finishing his commissioned work, the store is raided, with the book and its illustrations confiscated.<sup>43</sup> Peter, however, eventually finds a new machinist's job working

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<sup>43</sup> Bell, *All Brides are Beautiful*, pp. 205-208.

nightshift. The story ends on a high note with Peter and Mary looking to the future with confidence.

The critical response was good. In general, the critics overlooked Peter's Communist connections and did not see the story as a radical allegory. Rather, it was viewed as a story about a young couple dealing with life.<sup>44</sup> For its part the *Middle Berry College News Letter* declared it to be the best proletarian novel at the time, because Bell did not intend it to be a proletarian novel.<sup>45</sup> About the only critic who did not like it was a reviewer for *The Washington Post*, who considered the book vulgar, citing a line about the breakfast coffee "gurgling" in the pot as proof. She capped off her disdain by asserting that Bell did not know anything about working people, and that it took more than reading a few copies of *The Daily Worker* to acquire such a knowledge.<sup>46</sup> She obviously knew nothing about Bell's upbringing.

Bell's last novel, *There Comes A Time*, is similarly themed to *All Brides are Beautiful*. A New York couple struggle with the

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<sup>44</sup> Alfred Kazin "Love Without Money" *The New York Times*, Book Review Section, p. 7; John Chamberlain, "Stories of Submerged People", *Scribners'*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Moody, "The Survey Course or Tidying Up *Middlebury College News Letter*", March 1938, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Constance Stratton "Life of a Bronx Family: 'High School Naturalism' of a Novel Dealing With Social Problems", *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1936, p. XII.



challenges of daily life, and a limited income. The difference here is that the main characters, Joe Pane and his wife are older, and have two children. In addition, Pane is not a blue-collar worker, but is in a white-collar position, serving as head teller in a bank. Set in 1944, with World War II as a backdrop, Pane works to unionize his workplace. His current salary is \$40.00 a week, and he earns an extra \$10.00 by moonlighting two evenings a week managing his brother-in-law's liquor store. In the course of his work for the union, he visits his co-workers in their homes to convince them to sign union cards. Here he must overcome two obstacles: first, the attitude that white-collar workers have a "career" rather than a "job" and that joining a union would be unprofessional. Second, that the union would flood the bank with Jewish and African American members. Yet, Pane is persistent, and the union eventually wins a planned representation election.

Like *All Brides Are Beautiful*, *There Comes A Time* is subtle with respect to political and social overtones. At one point, Pane encounters his apartment building's superintendent, a man named Gilhooly, who Pane despises, but must tolerate. According to the narrative, Gilhooly is a miserable gossip and a member of Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic Christian Front. In another instance both Pane and his wife are members of the

leftist American Labor Party and go canvassing for F.D.R.'s reelection on Halloween. While making their rounds, they are joined by a group of Trick or Treaters and the whole episode takes on the qualities of a good-natured farce. Pane and his eventually end up the gang's apartment building, where both the canvassing and trick or treating comes to an end. <sup>47</sup>

Like Bell's other books *There Comes a Time* was well received by the critics. About the only sour note appeared in *Harper's Monthly*. While the critic stated that it was impossible for Bell to write a bad book, the "fellow-traveler" sort of Popular Frontism it featured was passé. In retrospect, one can see what the reviewer was getting at here, but considering the novel's setting, the sentiments it expressed were appropriate to the time. <sup>48</sup>

### **Political Activism**

For the most part, it appears the Bell operated under the radar. On the one hand, he was a member of the League of American Writers, the Civil Rights Congress and other organizations considered Communist fronts. He also had an FBI file - number 100-HQ-371027. The 100 in the file number is significant since

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Bell, *There Comes a Time* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), pp. 207-215.

<sup>48</sup> John Camberlain, "The New Books: Life Under F.D.R." *Harper's Magazine*, December 1946, p. 656.

it indicates that the Bureau considered him a security risk. However, the file's mere existence is not conclusive proof of anything. He also is supposed to have written for the *Daily Worker*. The source of this information, however, was a pamphlet issued by the HUAC concerning the Scientific and Cultural Conference on World Peace that was held at the Waldorf-Astoria on March 25-27, 1949. <sup>49</sup> There is credible evidence to show that the pamphlet's information was put together in a sloppy manner, and not fully verified, making some of its assertions questionable. <sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, it appears that Bell was never called before any of the Congressional investigating committees of the era such as HUAC or the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security (SSIS). Nor did he make any public statements that could be viewed as pro-Soviet prior to 1947. However, the USSR did receive a short favorable mention in *All Brides are Beautiful*.<sup>51</sup> With respect to Communism itself, about the only statement Bell made in the media was a comment that appeared in *New Masses*

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<sup>49</sup> *A Review of the Cultural and Scientific Conference on World Peace Arranged by the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions and Held in New York City March 25, 26, and 27, 1949* (Washington, DC: Prepared and Released by the House Committee on un-American Activities, April 1949, pp. 17ff.

<sup>50</sup> Richard P. Mulcahy, "The Justice, the Informer, and the Composer: The Roy Harris Case and The Dynamics of anti-Communism in Pittsburgh During the Early 1950s" *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, Winter 2015, p. 420.

<sup>51</sup> Bell, *All Brides are Beautiful*, pp. 354-355.

about the need for Communists and non-Communists to unite to defeat Fascism during World War II. He also signed an appeal in 1943 to the US House of Representatives to disband the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>52</sup>

But, once World War II ended, Bell did become more outspoken and for a short time openly engaged in Leftist activism. On the artistic front, he was a contributory author for the first edition of a new left-wing literary journal entitled *Mainstream*. Within the following year, this publication merged with *New Masses* and was retitled *Masses and Mainstream*. Bell's contribution was a short story entitled "The Man Who Made it in America".<sup>53</sup> It tells the story of a Slovak steel worker who was wrongfully imprisoned for twenty years. The mistake is eventually discovered, and the man is released. As a gesture of good will the steel company pays the man the back wages he would have earned if he had not gone to prison, totaling some \$15,000.00. The story is featured in the local newspaper and the men who know the man are discussing it. One of the discussants

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<sup>52</sup> "Unity With Communists, Thomas Bell", *The New Masses*, August 3, 1943, p. 20; *Investigation of Communist Activities in the San Francisco Area* Hearing Before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session, December 1953, Part 3, .3661

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Bell, "The Man Who Made Good in America" *Mainstream* Winter 1947, pp. 10-15.

is Mike Dobrecjak, who was a principal character in *Out of This Furnace* and a thinly veiled reference to Bell's father.<sup>54</sup>

In the story, Mike reads the news article to the other men, who express jealousy and derision for what they see as the man's good luck. From their perspective, \$15,000.00 was all the money in the world, allowing him to go back to the old country and live like a king, while they continue to slave in the mill. Mike takes the news with wry humor saying that yes, the man had "made it in America".<sup>55</sup> As mentioned above, Bell's father, Michael Belejcak died of Tuberculosis. He was just 39 when it happened. Bell, in this story, is calling out both the Horatio Alger myth of rags to riches, as well as the idea of the American Dream itself. The implication is that both are unattainable. In Bell's view, not only is rags to riches a canard, but possibly the whole idea of social mobility itself. The same story was later published in the *United Electrical Workers' Newsletter*.

However, Bell's most contentious activities from this period was his participation in what was later termed the Soviet Peace Offensive.<sup>56</sup> First, as mentioned above, there was his

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> *REPORT ON THE COMMUNIST 'PEACE OFFENSIVE: A Campaign To Disarm and Defeat the United States* (Washington, DC: Prepared and Released by the Committee on Un-American Activities, 1951), p. 104, 108, 111, 116. This material cites Bell's memberships in various Communist-front

connection with the Scientific and Cultural Conference on World Peace. Its sponsors characterized it as an international meeting of intellectuals, artists, and scientists whose purpose was to promote understanding and thereby defuse east/west tensions. To the conference's participants, the United States was the sole culprit in fomenting those tensions. NATO'S creation was denounced, as was the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.<sup>57</sup>

The meeting was profiled in *Life* magazine, with the meeting's participants written off as Communist sympathizers, fellow-travelers, and dupes. *Life* even went so far as present a set of pictures of the most prominent people at the meeting along with a short biography. Among those were Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Dalton Trumbo, and Albert Einstein.<sup>58</sup> For its part, HUAC condemned the meeting as an "Anti-American, Pro-Soviet jamboree". As mentioned above, Bell was one of the meeting's sponsors and served as an editor for its proceedings.

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organizations, as well as his sponsorship of the World Peace Conference that was held in Paris in April of 1949.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel S. Gilmore, ed., *Speaking of Peace: An Edited Report of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, New York March 25, 26, and 27, 1949 Under the Auspices of the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions* (New York: National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, 1949), p.1, pp. 20-25, pp. 70-72.

<sup>58</sup> "Red Visitors Cause Rumpus, The Russians Get a Big Hand from U.S. Friends, Dupes and Fellow Travelers Dress Up Communist Fronts, *Life*, April 4, 1949, pp. 39-43,

Even more provocative, however, was his signing an open letter that appeared in the March 1948 edition of *Masses and Mainstream*, it was entitled "Common Message: A Reply to an Open Letter of Soviet Writers" it was an answer to a piece entitled "Why Are You Silent? An Open Letter to American Writers From Soviet Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets".<sup>59</sup> It appeared in the *New Masses'* final edition, dated January 13, 1948, and had been taken from the September 20, 1947 edition of Moscow's *Literatunoya Gazetta* (Literary Gazette). Basically, the letter's authors claimed that America was supporting Fascism abroad with this nation's intelligentsia remaining silent on the matter and thereby complicit. For their parts, *New Masses* editors wrote that they were wondering the same thing, and that ". . . many in other countries, the present or future victims of the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine, are troubled by the same question."<sup>60</sup>

The American response was an embarrassingly over-the-top piece of pro-Soviet boilerplate. It began as follows "Some time ago you sent an open letter to writers and other representatives of culture in the United States. You expressed your concern for

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<sup>59</sup> "American Message: A Reply to an Open Letter of Soviet Writers," *Masses & Mainstream*, May 1948, pp. 3-6.

<sup>60</sup> "Why Are You Silent? An Open Letter to American Writers From Soviet Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets" *New Masses* January 11, 1948, pp. 10-12.

the future of the mankind, once again threatened by the tragedy of war which our ruling class has set in motion." <sup>61</sup> It then goes on to state "You know it is not the plan of the people of our country who see the toadstool rising above Hiroshima a throne from which to enslave the world. . . . They too are the exploiters who hope to convert America into a Fourth Reich." <sup>62</sup> It went on to damn the policies being followed by President Truman, while expressing undying support for former Vice President Henry Wallace, and his third-party campaign for the Presidency on the Progressive ticket. It concluded with the following statement "We will work for friendship between our peoples. Loving all countries, we will help our awakening people the true nature and source of their terrible peril. . . . Our enemies will all see our international solidarity for peace and democracy stand firm against their futile writhing and thrashing. On this May Day we grip your hand, the hand of all mankind." <sup>63</sup> Aside from Bell, there were 31 other signers, including Howard Fast, Alvah Bessie, and Ben Field. <sup>64</sup>

The letter was translated and appeared in *Literatunaya Gazetta*. But the translation stated that the signers "were

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<sup>61</sup> "American Message", p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



squarely on the side of the Soviet Union in opposition to current United States leadership and policies." This was a matter of grave concern, since such an assertion could have made the signers vulnerable to a disloyalty charge. Howard Fast commented that the Russian translation may have been garbled.<sup>65</sup> A more accurate statement was that the letter was used as a propaganda tool, and that the Soviets had engaged in some creative writing. As things turned out, the signers were accused of disloyalty and were raked over the coals in various editorials published across the country as well as on the floor of Congress. The signers responded with a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, protesting their loyalty, while asserting the letter was about opposing war mongering and suppression of civil liberties.<sup>66</sup>

Bell signed this letter but sent one of his own as well. It reads as follows: "As one of the thirty-two men and women who signed the letter to the Russian writers, I should like to comment on your news story regarding it. I agreed to the use of my name as a gesture of friendship from writers and artists of this country to those of Russia. I dread war, and the danger of

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<sup>65</sup> "Moscow Wags 32 Artists in U.S. Join in Soviet Fight on Our Policy: Moscow Claims Aid of Artists" *The New York Times*, May 3, 1948, p. 1, 3.

<sup>66</sup> "Authors Defend Open Letter: Answer to Soviet Writers Explained as Evidence of Concern for Freedom" *The New York Times*, May 24, 1948, p. 18

it seems to me very great; and any expression of a desire for understanding, and friendship between our two countries seems to me well worth making. In that spirit I signed the letter. The suggestion that by so doing I 'sided' with Russia against my own country is gratuitous and false and I can only repudiate it with all the force at my command. I have only one 'side' and that was determined for me long ago by my birthplace." <sup>67</sup>

Although the controversy made a momentary splash in the media, it did not amount to much and Bell apparently suffered no consequences, nor does he appear to have been blacklisted for this. So, the question here is, based on the available evidence, was Bell a Communist? Despite his leftist associations and commentary present here so far, there is nothing conclusive. However, there may be one tell that appears in *In the Midst of Life*. While reflecting on his slow death, Bell occasionally expresses disdain for Capitalism, and his hopeful belief that its collapse was imminent. <sup>68</sup> Second, and more telling though is that at one point he makes a vague reference to the "socialist" nations of the world putting an end to imperialism. <sup>69</sup> While not trying to read too much into what could be regarded as the

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<sup>67</sup> "Novelist Explains Stand" *The New York Times*, May 7, 1948, p. 22,

<sup>68</sup> Bell, *In the Midst of Life*. pp. 52, 90-93; 175-177; 270-272; 229, 269.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

literary equivalent of a throw-away remark, it does stand out. This was Soviet-speak, since only the USSR, as well as other Communist nations, referred to themselves by that term. While this may seem only as a trivial matter of semantics, it is far more profound than what it appears. At base, the Soviets saw themselves as the only legitimate interpreters of Marx and thereby the only legitimate heirs to the Socialist mantle, as did their supporters. By using that term in this context, Bell appears to have put himself in that camp.

**Conclusions**

Was Thomas Bell a Communist? Probably yes. Was he a fellow-traveler? Definitely yes. Was he a member of the CPUSA? Possibly not. This may account for why he was never blacklisted or called to testify before either HUAC or SSIS. It is also possible that he was not considered prominent or influential enough to be worth investigating. Bell had referred to himself as an unsuccessful novelist. He nevertheless was a man of integrity when it came to his art. At one point he worked for one year as a screen writer in Hollywood for a major studio, but he gave it up because he considered writing to order as selling out. He even mocked such formulaic writing in *In All Brides are Beautiful*, by referencing a radio detective show as background noise in one of the book's scenes.

Thus, the most important question is this: why would Bell associate himself with Communism? While his FBI file might provide some answers, it is currently unavailable. Moreover, the file may not provide the answer. It only dates from 1950. At this point, only some conjecture is possible, based upon reasonable assumptions taken from the record. It has already

been pointed out that the Capitalist system had cost Bell a great deal in terms of the loss of both his father and mother at an early age. However, in addition, the CPUSA in the 1930s was a far different organization than what it had been when it was founded. Under the leadership of William Z. Foster, the party's motto was "Toward a Soviet America". However, Foster fell out of grace for a time, and was replaced by Earl Browder. While Browder was not a charismatic leader, he was not tone-deaf and changed the party's motto to "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism". In this way, the party could present itself as a defender of the down-trodden and do so in the American context of civil liberties. This was probably the Communism that caught Bell's loyalty, especially since Browder was a supporter of the Popular Front, which called for all leftists to unite against Fascism. Although Browder was deposed from the party's leadership in 1945 and expelled all together shortly after that, he continued as an unrepentant representative of this branch of Communism.

I have no doubt that Bell felt the same way and believed that Browder's vision would be realized. Added to this was Bell's belief that Capitalism's collapse was imminent. This was probably due to the so-called Eisenhower recession that hit the American economy while Bell was writing *In the Midst of Life*. It

was the worst economic downturn to hit the United States since the Great Depression. As it was, Bell did have the satisfaction of being informed that his testament would be published. He died the very next day. Taking the measure, Bell was a man forged in steel and disciplined by the harsh realities of his early life. More than anything else, whatever form his politics took, he was moved by the noble desire to achieve something better and kinder not only for himself, but for all people.

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