



Public intellectuals as policy makers: the democratization of culture and Sean O’Faoláin’s Arts Council, 1956–1959

Brian McKenzie

To cite this article: Brian McKenzie (2020) Public intellectuals as policy makers: the democratization of culture and Sean O’Faoláin’s Arts Council, 1956–1959, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26:2, 255-265, DOI: [10.1080/10286632.2018.1501367](https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1501367)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1501367>



Published online: 23 Jul 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 183



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ARTICLE



Public intellectuals as policy makers: the democratization of culture and Sean O’Faoláin’s Arts Council, 1956–1959

Brian McKenzie 

Centre for Teaching and Learning, Maynooth University, County Kildare, Republic of Ireland

ABSTRACT

This article examines the brief tenure of the writer Sean O’Faoláin as Director of the Arts Council of Ireland. The article notes the generational similarities and shared outlook between O’Faoláin and André Malraux, the Minister of Culture for France from 1959 to 1969. However, O’Faoláin’s tenure in office was shorter, less successful, and marked by a bitter dispute with the administration and artists of the Royal Hibernian Academy. This dispute serves as a useful case study for examining competing conceptions of national culture, the purpose of cultural policy, and the role of the cultural elite as arbiters of taste.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 February 2018
Accepted 13 July 2018

KEYWORDS

Sean O’Faoláin; André Malraux; cultural policy; Arts Council (Ireland)

High-profile artists or public intellectuals rarely get to develop and implement cultural policy. When they have, the results have been mixed. The French writer André Malraux was arguably the most famous artist to make the transition from creator to cultural policy administrator. Malraux served as Minister for Cultural Affairs for a decade, from 1959 to 1969, under Charles de Gaulle and enjoyed significant successes such as the loaning of the *Mona Lisa* to the United States and the creation of *Maisons de la culture* (Lebovics 1999; Urfalino 2011). This article considers the tenure of another writer charged with developing state cultural policy, the Irish fiction writer and essayist Sean O’Faoláin. The Irish government appointed O’Faoláin the Director of An Chomhairle Ealaíon (The Arts Council) in 1956, 3 years before Malraux became minister.

As with Malraux’s ministry, O’Faoláin’s tenure in office illustrates the unique problems that can arise when public intellectuals transition from critic to policy maker. This article examines a controversy involving O’Faoláin’s Arts Council and the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) in 1959. The Arts Council co-sponsored the RHA’s annual exhibition through a scheme that allowed local government bodies in Ireland to purchase works from the exhibition. In 1959, O’Faoláin dismissed the works on display and refused Arts Council funding. The subsequent controversy fought out in the press offers insight into the essence of cultural policy. It tells us how politicians, artists, and bureaucrats think about culture and cultural policy in relation to the fundamental issue of the public and taste. The episode provides insight into cultural policy because the protagonists viewed national culture as a living, vibrant, contested, and, in the case of Ireland, emergent construct.

To understand O’Faoláin’s tenure in office, it is helpful to compare him to Malraux, about whom much more has been written. Malraux offers an important comparison to O’Faoláin because of their shared transition from writer to policy maker, their shared assumptions about art and culture, and the close chronological juxtaposition of the creation of the Arts Council in Ireland and the Ministry of Culture in France. Both believed that French culture was pre-eminent – ‘What style England has

CONTACT Brian McKenzie  brian.mckenzie@mu.ie  Centre for Teaching and Learning, Maynooth University, Rowan House, Maynooth University, County Kildare, Republic of Ireland

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Pierre Bourdieu

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Table 1. An Chomhairle Ealaíon budget and spending (“An Chomhairle Ealaíon, Estimate 1958–1959, Detailed Brief,” n.d.).

Year	Estimated budget	£ Issued
1951–52	£1,100	£1,100
1952–53	£10,000	£10,000
1953–54	£20,000	£11,400
1954–55	£20,000	£19,150
1955–56	£20,000	£18,889
1956–57	£20,000	£17,000
1957–58	£20,000	£20,000

learnt she probably got for the most part from France’ remarked O’Faoláin in 1929 (2016a, 15). There are generational similarities too. Malraux was born in 1901, O’Faoláin in 1900. Both identified with the left when young were prolific fiction writers in the 1930s and moved to the political centre in the 1940s. Malraux fought in the Spanish Civil War as a grown man; in his late teens during the Irish War of Independence, O’Faoláin joined the Irish Volunteers (Harmon 1994, 50). A key difference was their education. Whereas Malraux lacked a formal education, O’Faoláin earned a master’s degree in English from University College Cork in 1926 and a second MA in Modern Languages from Harvard in 1928. He lectured at Boston College briefly after completing his Harvard degree. He returned to Ireland in the 1930s to become a full-time writer. Arguably O’Faoláin’s biggest influence was as editor of *The Bell* from 1940 to 1946 (Harmon 2009). As we will see, his writings during this period are key to understanding his actions as head of the Arts Council. In the 1950s, O’Faoláin regularly lectured at Princeton and other U.S. universities. In 1957, Trinity College Dublin awarded him an honorary DLitt. Both Malraux and O’Faoláin lacked any administrative experience when they assumed their government roles, and both were towering figures, subsuming the institutions they headed under their own egos and renown.

However, the most important similarity between Malraux and O’Faoláin was their approach to cultural policy as the democratization of culture. This situates their time in office chronologically in the development of twentieth-century cultural policy, but it also provides a better understanding of O’Faoláin as part of the intellectual tradition in Europe (Kent 2017, 333). Writing in the 1930s (and appearing in English in 1956 as *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*), the sociologist Karl Mannheim argued that a ‘democratizing trend’ was the key feature of the twentieth century. As culture democratized, pockets of special, restricted knowledge would remain and Mannheim identifies scientific experts and ‘connoisseurs’ of art as two important elite domains of knowledge (Mannheim 2012, 185). In the case of art, it is the task of policy makers to democratize access to overcome the elite preserve of connoisseurs. As Mannheim explains, ‘In order to become [a connoisseur], the student must come into contact with the works themselves, and be stimulated by them to the depths of his personality, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually’ (Mannheim 2012, 186). Both O’Faoláin’s and Malraux’s works in office are exemplars of this school.

In practice, the priority for the democratization of culture paradigm is increasing access to great art by disseminating it regionally and making attendance to exhibitions and performances affordable (Mulcahy 2006, 324). In this model, audiences are passive consumers who benefit from exposure to great art (Evrard 1997, 171). As Herman Lebovics bluntly states, Malraux’s goal ‘was to create audiences, not active participants’ (Lebovics 1999, 129). This was because, according to Malraux, great art could ‘speak for itself’ without need for mediation based on race, class, gender, or place (Looseley 2004, 17). In the United Kingdom, this approach is clearly evident in the motto of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (the precursor to the 1946 Arts Council of Great Britain): ‘The Best for the Most’ (Alexander 2007, 186). The Arts Council of Great Britain continued the emphasis on access to fine art (Quinn 1998, 103). Similarly, the 1959 French law establishing the Minister of Culture in France prioritized making the great works accessible to the largest audience (Lebovics 1999, 89). Malraux shows the example of the positive form of this school – increasing access to high art – while O’Faoláin’s conflict with the RHA shows its negative form,

restricting access to art deemed inferior (in Mannheim's paradigm, this is the difference between democratization and the danger of 'massification').

The RHA controversy in 1959 thus serves as a discrete case study that shows the limits of the democratization of culture model before the full assault on the paradigm in the 1960s. Indeed, O'Faoláin's actions as director anticipate and confirm the premises of Malraux's own philosophy and approach: an empire of European culture exists with France as its leader. For O'Faoláin, the question was: what contribution could Ireland make to European culture and how could the tastes and standards of the Irish population be developed and made modern? O'Faoláin saw his time as Director of the Arts Council as an opportunity to replace state and clerical censorship with 'true' aesthetic taste and distinction, voluntaristic censorship rather than state censorship.

There can be no doubt that for O'Faoláin the stakes were high. For him, there was and is an Irish national culture; Ireland was in a historical conjuncture as a newly independent state, and this national culture was being actively shaped and contested by the state, the Church, nationalists, Gaelic revivalists, and artists and writers such as himself. This is what makes the 1959 RHA controversy a compelling case study. It offers the opportunity, as Lebovics suggests, to 'investigate the specificities of how culture works, or perhaps doesn't work, as historical praxis' (Lebovics 1999, x).

The Bodkin report and the creation of An Chomhairle Ealaíon

Modern cultural policy in Ireland and the actual creation of the Arts Council have its origins in a 1949 report by Thomas Bodkin, the noted Irish collector, curator, and Director of the National Gallery from 1927 to 1935 (Bourke 2013, 366). During a parliamentary debate in July 1949, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) John A. Costello offered a detailed explanation of Ireland's recent progress in agricultural and industrial output, made quantifiable by the state's recent adoption of modern, rigorous statistical methods. Costello concluded his lengthy presentation of economic statistics with a warning. 'While we are concentrating on our material advancement,' he explained, 'We should not, I think, neglect matters of the spirit' ("Parliamentary Debates" 1949). The government had a responsibility to 'create or recreate, a proper national tradition in art.' The Taoiseach then announced that he had commissioned Thomas Bodkin to author a report proposing an arts policy for the government. Bodkin and Costello were old friends. In fact, they corresponded privately before the announcement with an understanding that the report would result in a high-level post for Bodkin: 'What I look for is enough to live on in decent comfort in Dublin with a guarantee of continuous congenial employment' (Kennedy 1990, 76).

Bodkin delivered his report to the government in October. It is a unique, fascinating document combining erudition and post-colonial cultural cringe (O'Connor 2006, xvi). He described most of the National Museum's collection as 'trivial or ridiculous' pieces that do 'more harm than good to the taste of our people' (Bodkin 1949). 'A large proportion of the existing exhibitions,' recommended Bodkin, 'should be put permanently in store, sold, lent, or even given away' (Bodkin 1949).

Bodkin's assessment of the National Gallery's collection was more positive, but he condemned its management. He described its collection as 'of remarkable importance, well-known and highly esteemed' (Bodkin 1949). Yet, according to Bodkin, the Irish public knew nothing of this outstanding cultural treasure; tourism guides neglected it to the extent that taxi drivers were unaware of its location, and publicity was non-existent – not even the Gallery itself offered lectures about the collection. 'It would seem to be in a stagnant, if not moribund, condition,' was Bodkin's assessment (Bodkin 1949).

The report continued in this vein for 50 pages. The National College of Art possessed a competent staff, but lax entrance requirements and neglect of the subject by the educational system produced students that were weak. Regarding the RHA, Bodkin quoted a 1905 British report into it: 'The Irish academicians may not be good artists, but artists they are and when Ireland loses its academicians it will have sunk deeper into the morass' (Bodkin 1949).

Bodkin concluded his report by calling for the creation of a department responsible for the arts reporting directly to the Taoiseach. Its proposed remit was sweeping. The new department would administer the National Gallery, National Museum, and National College of Art; organize exhibitions and state ceremonies; design stamps and coins; contribute to industrial design; act as a patron to individual artists; promote Irish culture and art abroad (O'Faoláin had called for the same thing in a 1945 essay); preserve Ireland's architectural heritage; and even advise on town planning (Bodkin 1949).

The problem was that in 1945, Patrick Little, a member of the opposition Fianna Fáil party, and then Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, had authored a separate report proposing a Council of Culture (Kennedy 1990, 79). A political negotiation was now needed to get an 'Arts Bill' passed which was made difficult by the tone of Bodkin's report and his dire assessment of the physical state of Irish institutions (Kennedy 1990, 79). Costello spent 1950 and half of 1951 revising and shepherding the Arts Bill through the Irish parliament.

The Arts Act, 1951, created the Arts Council. It was weak compared to what Bodkin had called for in his report. The law created the Arts Council in the Department of the Taoiseach and gave it responsibility to (Electronic Irish Statute 1951):

- Stimulate public interest in the arts,
- Promote the knowledge, appreciation, and practice of the arts,
- Assist in improving the standards of the arts,
- Organize or assist in the organizing of exhibitions (within or without the State) of works of art and artistic craftsmanship.

The act gave the Arts Council political independence – the President of Ireland rather than the leader of the government appointed the director. Funding had to be voted for by the government, however. During the 1950s, the Council never received more than £20,000 (see table 1).

The Irish Arts Council resembled both the Arts Council of Great Britain which preceded it and the Minister for Cultural Affairs in France which followed it. For all three, cultural policy focused on art. Malraux was the most ambitious in trying to broaden the scope of cultural policy, but even with the support of de Gaulle he had limited success (Lebovics 1999, 92). Education, radio, film, or television remained outside the realm of cultural policy.

A month after the Arts Act passed, the government fell. A Fianna Fáil-led government replaced it. The new Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera, ignored Bodkin's claims on the job and appointed Patrick Little as the first director. The author of the semi-official history of the Arts Council, Brian P. Kennedy, describes Little as a veteran politician who revelled in the publicity associated with the role (Kennedy 1990, 103). As for Little, he made his priorities clear in an interview with a regional newspaper: 'Rural Ireland holds the heart of Ireland and it will not do to confine the Council's activities to the urban centres' (Kennedy 1990, 103). Bodkin spent the 1950s criticizing the work of the Council in private and public. He turned down the job of director after Little resigned when Costello returned to power in 1956. For Bodkin, the Council was 'a complacent and lethargic waste' that spent its time and money subsidising 'minor and purely local' initiatives (Kennedy 1990, 117).

To make matters worse, in late 1956, the minuscule budget of the Council came under threat. The Minister for Finance, Gerard Sweetman, complained to Costello that the £20,000 annual grant to the Arts Council was excessive, stating that 'non-essential' services needed to be reined in to reduce government spending. 'I am sure you will feel able to agree,' he wrote, 'to provision not exceeding £17,000 – though, frankly, I would have thought £15,000 would have been sufficient' (Sweetman 1956). Costello rejected the suggestion of his minister outright:

The suggestion that An Chomhairle Ealaíon comes within the category of "non-essential" services is one on which I prefer to make no comment – for the sake of my blood pressure! But, seriously, I feel that the provision generally for cultural services is regrettably low. (Costello 1956)

Costello noted that the Council was in the midst of a reorganization, concluded he could not agree to the cut in funding, and instructed his minister ‘not to press me on the matter’ (Costello 1956).

Costello consulted with his son Declan, an elected member of the parliament, and his son-in-law to find Little’s replacement (Kennedy 1990, 117). They put forward Sean O’Faoláin and Costello senior recommended him for appointment to the President of Ireland on 21 December 1956 over the objections of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (Kennedy 1990, 118; Harmon 1994, 209).

In a 22 December 1956 article announcing the appointment of O’Faoláin, the *Irish Times* declared: ‘It would be very difficult to say just what the Arts Council has done – what positive contribution it has made to the cultivation of artistic taste in Ireland – during the first five years of its life’ (The Irish Times 1956). The newspaper pointed out that its small budget allowed the Arts Council to do little more than offer encouragement to artists.

An interesting feature of O’Faoláin’s tenure in office was his preference for explaining his actions and outlook in letters to national newspapers. He did so a few days after the *Irish Times* article. O’Faoláin began by offering a selective list of projects supported by the Arts Council. Significantly, he listed only high culture proceedings such as the London Philharmonic’s concert in Limerick (O’Faoláin 1956). There was no mention of Irish art or artists at all in his list of achievements, or of regional programmes. He then declared that the Arts Council had attempted too much in the previous 5 years given its meagre resources. He closed the letter with a clear indication of his policy going forward: ‘Perhaps it might be wiser for us to concentrate on fewer things of the very first rank, in order to establish standards of excellence’ (O’Faoláin 1956).

The Winter Lecture series of 1958 to 1959 illustrates O’Faoláin’s prescription for developing standards of excellence. The series consisted of six lectures from October 1958 to March 1959 (The Irish Times 1958). Not one of the speakers was Irish; not one of the lectures addressed Irish culture or arts in its title:

- The Art of Reading a Picture (illustrated), René Huyghe (curator of paintings at the Louvre).
- The Poet in his own World, Pierre Emmanuel
- Choral Music – Composer and Listener, Felix de Nobel
- Voice and Viewpoint in Modern American Poetry, John L. Sweeney (curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard’s Lamont Library)
- Depth and Breadth in the Novel, Angus Wilson
- The Present State of Dramatic Art in France, Gabriel Marcel

Painting, poetry, music, drama, and fiction – O’Faoláin offered the populace a syllabus of lectures that would equip attendees with a basic competence to engage with high culture. The presence of three French speakers out of the six also indicates the source from which O’Faoláin hoped the Irish would acquire taste and draw inspiration.

Unlike Little, O’Faoláin neglected local efforts. This is a common feature of the democratization of culture model. Malraux’s *Maisons de la culture* in the provinces were not intended to encourage local, grassroots efforts. Rather, their purpose was to increase ‘aesthetic supply’ in the provinces (Lebovics 1999). O’Faoláin’s lack of interest in local projects prompted a letter in December 1958 from Dr Nicholas Nolan, Assistant Secretary in the Department of the Taoiseach. Nolan wanted to know why money earmarked for local projects had not been spent. The Council’s Secretary, Mervyn Wall, explained that local organizers lacked the ‘effort and enthusiasm’ demanded by the Arts Council (Wall 1958). In addition, an exhibition from the Victoria and Albert Museum had to be cancelled because the Irish facilities could not satisfy the ‘stringent conditions’ required to display the works.

The lower slopes of Parnassus

O’Faoláin spent from April to June 1959 embroiled in a dispute with the RHA. Since 1954, the Arts Council had subsidized the purchase by local government offices of works by Irish artists. The Arts

Council coordinated the scheme through the annual exhibition of the RHA. Representatives of the Arts Council visited the exhibition and then prepared a catalogue of 'selected' works for distribution to the 75 local authorities in Ireland. The funding covered half the expense of purchases up to £50 (roughly \$1800 in 2017) and half of the expense in transporting the work. From 1954 to 1958 the Arts Council had spent £1,829 on purchases (between 7 and 18 works per year) ("An Chomhairle Ealaíon General Note" 1959). £50 to £100 may seem negligible but it was certainly meaningful to an Irish artist in the 1950s.

The 1959 exhibition of the RHA began in April. O'Faoláin and another member of the Arts Council toured the exhibition on 30 April (De Burca 1959c). Two weeks later the RHA telephoned the Arts Council for the list of approved works. Mervyn Wall, the Arts Council secretary, informed the RHA that the Council was not recommending any of the works for purchase (De Burca 1959c). The Secretary of the RHA, Michael de Burca, wrote to O'Faoláin after the phone call requesting the names of the Arts Council members who visited the exhibition and their recommended purchases (De Burca 1959a). O'Faoláin did not respond to the letter, so John Keating, the President of the RHA, wrote a scathing letter to the *Irish Times* on 23 May.

Keating noted that the funds for the scheme were 'painfully and lovingly extracted' from the public purse for the purchase of art to decorate town halls and libraries (Keating 1959). Keating explained that most local authorities did not avail of the scheme. Why? The scheme required that the works be selected by the Arts Council. In many cases the local authorities were 'not impressed' by the works on the approved list. 'I do not know,' continued Keating, 'What is the method of election or nomination to the Arts Council, nor what qualifications are necessary for membership' (Keating 1959). Keating then suggested that the Arts Council be removed from the selection process. Instead, the members of the local authorities could visit the annual exhibition and pick six works. They could take advice from the Council. 'If the Arts Council thinks that one of its functions is to educate public taste,' explained Keating, 'It might advise the local authorities as to which of their six selections the council considers to be the truest works of art' (Keating 1959). Keating then pointed out that under the present system 'provincial taste must necessarily need a metropolitan imprimatur.'

De Burca joined the fray in a 29 May letter to the *Irish Independent*. He called the Arts Council decision 'arbitrary,' 'outrageous,' and 'the result of some extraordinary prejudice' (De Burca 1959b). The decision had damaged the 'good name and artistic integrity' of the contributors. De Burca complained that only O'Faoláin and one other member of the Council had visited the exhibition. This was an inadequate representation he concluded, 'Or are we to believe that the Director of the Arts Council and his fellow member presume that they alone are the arbiters of taste?' (De Burca 1959b).

In another letter to the *Irish Times*, Fergus O'Ryan, one of the painters passed over by the Arts Council, asked,

What are the qualifications to become a member of the Arts Council – apart from the fact then when on leave in Paris in '17 you stood Modigliani a pernod or that you picked up a little Bonnard when on your honeymoon in the '30s? (O'Ryan 1959a)

Wall did finally reply in writing to the RHA on the 2nd of June. In a brief letter he informed the RHA that the Council had followed the same procedure as in previous years. The only difference was the outcome: 'The decision of the Council was: that no action should be taken under the Council's scheme for Purchase of Painting by Local Authorities in respect of the R.H.A. Exhibition 1959' (Wall 1959b).

We can now turn to O'Faoláin's response. The questions raised by Keating, de Burca, and O'Ryan are clear: Who is qualified to judge art? Is a commitment by the state to 'stimulate' art and promote its practice an entitlement to funding? How does the state reconcile its role in promoting standards and taste through 'true' art and its function of supporting art in Ireland?

To understand O'Faoláin's position, we must first consider his writings in *The Bell* and elsewhere. The 1941 article 'Standards and Taste,' unsurprisingly, offers a concise view of his thoughts on the issue. He wrote the article in response to a controversy involving the Abbey Theatre. The play *The Money Doesn't Matter* by Louis Lynch D'Alton ran for 9 weeks and was hugely popular despite

being condemned by reviews in *The Bell* (Kent 2016, 145). O'Faoláin explains the gap between critical and public opinion bluntly. It is the result of 'a complete lack of standards on the part of that theatre's public' (O'Faoláin 2016b). According to O'Faoláin, this condition can be explained historically, although, as we will see, pathology also creeps into the explanation: 'As regards Taste and Standards, we must recognise that they are still entirely undeveloped out of their elementary instinctive condition. We are groping' (O'Faoláin 2016a, 145). Time, not censors or the public of the day, was the final arbiter. However, it remained for the culture to produce the works that history would judge. O'Faoláin calls for his readers to celebrate and popularize the beautiful and condemn the cheap and ugly (O'Faoláin 2016a, 148–49).

As for Irish culture, O'Faoláin had identified an issue with the peasantry. In his influential history, *The Irish*, published in 1947, and later in a 1968 interview for the documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin*, O'Faoláin offered up the Irish peasantry as a historical pathology. Historically, the peasantry was culturally productive. 'They preserved up to our own and our children's day, a folk-lore of imaginative power, some humour, and much variety' (O'Faoláin 1947, 97). Yet the peasantry never became modern because rural Ireland never became modern. As a result, Irish society post-independence was composed of 'urbanized peasants' (Lennon 1968). They struggled to be modern:

Here he now seems to be fumbling in an ungainly fashion with strange tools, rather lost, not very attractive, developing into a bastard type which is neither countryman nor townsman, unable, as yet, to make a smooth transition from the simplicity of the fields to the sophistication of the streets. (O'Faoláin 1947, 101)

The condition of the peasantry was one factor that impacted on Irish standards and taste. The other was censorship. O'Faoláin attacked state censorship consistently in the 1930s and 40s. Censorship by the State and Church was an attempt to impose standards from above. In 1936, he condemned the practice because it 'debased the public conscience' (O'Faoláin 2016c, 91). The five members of the Irish Censorship Board claimed a license not only to judge Irish works, but the entire creative works of humanity. 'Well may we ask,' he writes, 'If there is now a monopoly of knowledge which, like motor-tyres, has been granted by tariff to these five men' (O'Faoláin 2016b, 93)? Similarly, in 'Standards and Taste' he lambasts censors for not being authors – 'none of whom has ever written a piece of fiction, a play, or a poem' (O'Faoláin 2016a, 146).

To be clear, O'Faoláin was not opposed to censorship as such, merely who exercised it. In *The Irish*, O'Faoláin excoriates the Catholic Church in Ireland not only for censorship but also its parochialism and ignorance. He laments that there was no Catholic intelligentsia in Ireland, no equivalent of Emmanuel Mounier's *Esprit* (O'Faoláin 1947, 152). 'The priest and the writer,' he explains, 'ought to be fighting side by side, if for nothing else than the rebuttal of the vulgarity that is pouring daily into the vacuum left in the popular mind by the dying out of the old traditional life' (O'Faoláin 1947, 152).

Of course, the supporters of the RHA levelled the same criticism at the Arts Council that O'Faoláin employed in his own writing. O'Faoláin condemned the censors for not being writers – yet he was perfectly confident in his ability to pass judgement on paintings and sculptures. What, then, separated O'Faoláin from his critics? A year before the RHA controversy, O'Faoláin published a lengthy piece in the *Irish Times* entitled 'Any Use for Art?' In it he condemns the common understanding of art:

Unfortunately, most people who like talking about Art do not mean works of art as part of life – as much of it as a rugby international in Dublin or a bloody ambush in Algeria. They think of it as a bit of decoration up on the wall, something pleasantly removed from the painful, lovely, exciting and sometimes squalid business of living – in fact, a form of escape from life. (O'Faoláin 1958)

He recommended the reader consult *Le Monde Chrétien*, volume 3, of Malraux's epic study and anthology of art, *Le Musée imaginaire*, for examples of art in search of truth. Like Plato's discerning philosopher kings, O'Faoláin claimed to grasp the true essence and purpose of works of art.

We can now return to 1959. O'Faoláin's response to the controversy appeared as a letter in the *Irish Times* on the 5th of June. After a brief description of the purchasing scheme, O'Faoláin

summarizes the position of his critics: 'that they know as well or even better than the Arts Council what works of art are good enough for local authorities to buy' (O'Faoláin 1959b). He acknowledges that this question was 'not susceptible of simple answers.' However, O'Faoláin points out that a key difference between the Arts Council and the RHA is 'the Arts Council have to stand over every work of art bought under this scheme ... they were appointed to act as a public guide in matters of taste' (O'Faoláin 1959b). O'Faoláin then offers a brief discourse on distinction. He explains, 'Genius, as Diderot has said, is bestowed in an instant; taste is developed slowly; the two do not necessarily go together; and taste is, in any case, notoriously fallible.' In other words, the artists of the RHA did not possess genius and those who wanted to purchase their works had not yet developed taste.

O'Faoláin closes his letter with two observations. First, he denies that every work on display was irredeemable. There were actually two 'acceptable' pieces of art (Wall 1959a). This, however, would have been too awkward to state. O'Faoláin explains:

In fact, the Arts Council found itself happy about so few paintings in this exhibition that they quietly decided that it would be more tactful not to apply their scheme at all to the exhibition rather than shock the public or offend the Academy by circulating a very small list of "approved" pictures. (1959b)

Next, he acknowledges that a discussion of taste and art in modern Ireland is appropriate, but not in the Letters to the Editor section of the *Irish Times*:

I think it has been unwise of the Academy to submit such questions to the *vox populi* as if painting were as universally intelligible as, say, proportional representation. Indeed, I am not sure that by making this kind of appeal to all and sundry, the Academy is not surrendering its rank and title altogether. (O'Faoláin 1959b)

O'Faoláin, then, was clear on the issues. Who is qualified to judge art? O'Faoláin. Was the Arts Council required to support Irish art? Not if he deemed pieces to be inferior.

Fergus O'Ryan fired a final volley in the *Irish Times* on 8 June. He noted the history and ongoing practice of censorship in Ireland and accused the Arts Council of continuing the practice by deciding that local authorities lacked the taste to select works of art (O'Ryan 1959b). O'Ryan then meditated on the origins and acquisition of taste. How had the members of the Arts Council come to possess it? How does anyone? More fundamentally, is there any benefit to be had from art created by those who lacked genius? If local authorities liked works deemed inferior by the Arts Council might it be the case that hanging pedestrian art on the wall could, in 75 years, lead provincial officials to Pollack or Mondrian? (O'Ryan 1959b). Might these paintings, asks O'Ryan, 'give some pleasure and bring a little happiness to those unfortunates who are compelled to inhabit the lower slopes of Parnassus?' (O'Ryan 1959b).

The conflict then moved into the political realm. Richard Gogan, a member of the governing party Fianna Fáil, issued a parliamentary question to the Taoiseach, now Eamon de Valera, on the purchase scheme. Gogan specifically asked: what were the qualifications of the members of the Arts Council, was their decision an attack on the competence of the RHA, and would future decisions on purchasing be made by the entire Arts Council? ("Parliamentary Debates" 1959). A detailed memorandum was prepared for the Taoiseach in cooperation with the Arts Council secretary Mervyn Wall ("An Chomhairle Ealaíon General Note" 1959). It addressed all of Gogan's points. First, the Council was free to run the scheme as it thought fit. Second, its members were appointed by the President (the director), the government ('ordinary' members), and the Council ('co-opted' members); to question their qualifications was to question the judgement of the President and the government. The RHA voluntarily submitted to the judgement of the Arts Council. As for the final question, it was dismissed as impractical. The Taoiseach's official response in the parliament, via his secretary was, 'Having regard to the provisions of the Arts Act, 1951, the operation of that scheme is entirely within the discretion of An Chomhairle Ealaíon. I have no function in the matter' ("Parliamentary Debates" 1959). A new Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, issued the same reply when contacted by Michael de Burca again in November (Lemass 1959).

This seemed to be, then, a total victory for O'Faoláin. He waged the battle in public, was an unrepentant defender of an elite, top-down approach to cultural policy, and successfully upheld the independence of the Arts Council. However, despite appearances this was not a victory. Rather, it was a last act, for O'Faoláin had actually resigned from the Arts Council in April with an effective date of 30 June. His attacks on the RHA occurred while the government considered his replacement. O'Faoláin cited the limited resources of the council and the demands on his time in his resignation letter (O'Faoláin 1959a). 'The director of An Chomhairle Ealain,' concluded O'Faoláin, 'Should be a young and active man devoting all his time and energies to the work' (1959a). O'Faoláin's replacement was the 71-year-old Jesuit priest Pádraig de Brún, who died less than a year after accepting the role. He was replaced by another priest, Donal O'Sullivan ("Government Minutes. An Chomhairle Ealain: Membership" 1960).

Conclusion

Describing Malraux's ambition as Minister, Lebovics writes, 'For him, high culture would replace the eclipsed religions of the twentieth century, folding the people of France into the bosom of this new transcendental aesthetic' (Lebovics 2011, 349). O'Faoláin shared this aspiration. He demonstrated complete accord with Malraux's understanding of culture and an open acknowledgement that French culture was preeminent. France was an ancient nation with a cultural tradition. Ireland was a newly independent state under the rule of the Irish Catholic Church and their political proxies; it lacked high culture. There was a lot of work to be done to make Ireland modern – politically, industrially, and culturally.

There are two key differences between Malraux's cultural policies in France and the early cultural policy of independent, post-colonial Ireland. The first is the role of national culture as defined by the makers of cultural policy. Malraux wanted to protect, democratize, and spread his version and understanding of French culture. O'Faoláin agreed with this approach but not its applicability to Ireland. Malraux saw French high culture as a unifying force. For O'Faoláin, the landscape of Irish culture was a much bleaker vista painted by priests, mediocre politicians, and urban peasants. What cultural policy do you pursue if your diagnosis of the culture is terminal? In his brief tenure in office O'Faoláin attempted to educate the Irish public, to modernize its aesthetic taste in line with his vision of culture befitting a member of the European elite. Language is the second area of divergence. French policy makers and intellectuals have traditionally viewed French culture as inseparable from the French language (Lebovics 1999, 186). In the Irish context, however, O'Faoláin claimed that the Irish language had been seized as a political and cultural weapon by politicians and nationalists: 'The Gaeltacht, the language, the Revival, everything associated with what was once so honoured and so nourishing, is now a bitter taste in the mouth, sometimes positively nauseating' (O'Faoláin 2016a, 192). The 'restoration of the Irish language' was explicitly excluded from the domain of the Arts Council by Eamon de Valera in 1952 (Kennedy 1990, 104). In the early history of Irish cultural policy, the Gaelic League and other Irish language groups, not the Arts Council, would promote the Irish language (this division eroded in the twenty-first century with the creation of the Minister for Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht).

Lebovics identifies a fundamental flaw in Malraux's project: equating a popular audience for high culture as somehow equivalent to yet superior to popular culture (Lebovics 1999, 155). Malraux deliberately chose to be a minister of culture rather than 'arts' (Looseley 2011, 368). For elitists like O'Faoláin, Irish popular culture was the problem. It reflected the values of the Church, prevented Ireland from developing as a modern European state, drove its most creative citizens abroad, and forced their work underground. Maybe there is an Irish *sonderweg* arising from the combination of colonialism and clerical repression. O'Faoláin failed because of an antimony at the core of his worldview: writers were the most modern element of Irish culture, but they were also the least Irish.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Brian McKenzie received his PhD in history from Stony Brook University and is the author of *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan*.

ORCID

Brian McKenzie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5886-0172>

References

- Alexander, V. D. 2007. "State Support of Artists: The Case of the United Kingdom in a New Labour Environment and Beyond." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 37 (3): 185–200. doi:10.3200/JAML.37.3.185-200.
- Bodkin, T. 1949. "Report to the Government of Ireland on Various Institutions and Activities Concerned with the Arts in Ireland." *Department of Foreign Affairs, DFA 338/188 I*. National Archives of Ireland.
- Bourke, M. 2013. *The Story of Irish Museums, 1790–2000: Culture, Identity and Education*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- "An Chomhairle Ealaíon General Note." 1959. TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.
- "An Chomhairle Ealaíon, Estimate 1958–1959, Detailed Brief." n.d. TAOIS/S 15225C. National Archives of Ireland.
- Costello, J. 1956. "Letter from Costello to Sweetman." TAOIS/S 15225C. National Archives of Ireland.
- De Burca, M. 1959a. "Letter from De Burca to O'Faolain." TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.
- De Burca, M. 1959b. "Dublin Exhibition: R.H.A. Protest." *The Irish Independent*. May 29, 1959.
- De Burca, M. 1959c. "Letter from Michael De Burca, Secretary of the Royal Hibernian Academy, to Taoiseach Sean Lemass." TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.
- Electronic Irish Statute. 1951. "Arts Act, 1951." <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1951/act/9/enacted/en/html>.
- Evrard, Y. 1997. "Democratizing Culture or Cultural Democracy?" *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 27 (3): 167–175. doi:10.1080/10632929709596961.
- "Government Minutes. An Chomhairle Ealaíon: Membership." 1960. TAOIS/S 15073B. National Archives of Ireland.
- Harmon, M. 1994. *Sean O'Faolain: A Life*. 1st ed. London: Constable.
- Harmon, M. 2009. *Dictionary of Irish Biography – Cambridge University Press*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Irish Times*. 1956. "The Arts Council," December 22, 1956.
- The Irish Times*. 1958. "Winter Lectures," September 22, 1958.
- Keating, J. 1959. "A Question of Taste." *The Irish Times*. May 23, 1959.
- Kennedy, B. P. 1990. *Dreams and Responsibilities: The State and Arts in Independent Ireland*. Dublin, Ireland: Arts Council.
- Kent, B. 2016. *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*. 1st ed. Montreal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kent, B. 2017. "Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Faolain, and the Irish Public Intellectual." *Irish University Review* 47 (2): 331–349. doi:10.3366/iur.2017.0284.
- Lebovics, H. 1999. *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lebovics, H. 2011. "Cultural Policy." In *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, edited by E. Berenson. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lemass, S. 1959. "Letter from Lemass to De Burca." TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.
- Lennon, P. 1968. *Rocky Road to Dublin*.
- Looseley, D. 2004. "The Development of a Social Exclusion Agenda in French Cultural Policy." *Cultural Trends* 13 (2): 15–27. doi:10.1080/0954896042000267125.
- Looseley, D. 2011. "Notions of Popular Culture in Cultural Policy: A Comparative History of France and Britain." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 17 (4): 365–379. doi:10.1080/10286632.2010.541907.
- Mannheim, K. 2012. *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Mulcahy, K. 2006. "Cultural Policy: Definitions and Theoretical Approaches." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 35 (4): 319–330. doi:10.3200/JAML.35.4.319-330.
- O'Connor, L. 2006. *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire, and De-Anglicization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- O'Faoláin, S. 1947. *The Irish*. West Drayton: Pelican Books.
- O'Faoláin, S. 1956. "The Arts Council." *The Irish Times*. December 29, 1956.

- O'Faoláin, S. 1958. "Any Use for Art?" *The Irish Times*, January 24, 1958.
- O'Faoláin, S. 1959a. "Letter from O'Faolain to Taoiseach." TAOIS/S 15073B. National Archives of Ireland.
- O'Faoláin, S. 1959b. "A Question of Taste." *The Irish Times*, June 5, 1959.
- O'Faoláin, S. 2016a. "Gaelic – The Truth." In *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*, edited by B. Kent, 192–196. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- O'Faoláin, S. 2016b. "The Cruelty and Beauty of Words." In *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*, edited by B. Kent, 3–19. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- O'Faoláin, S. 2016c. "The Dangers of Censorship." In *The Selected Essays of Sean O'Faolain*, edited by B. Kent, 90–96. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- O'Ryan, F. 1959a. "Starving the Mind." *The Irish Times*, June 2, 1959.
- O'Ryan, F. 1959b. "A Question of Taste." *The Irish Times*, June 8, 1959.
- "Parliamentary Debates." 1949. November 10, 1949. <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1949072100001?opendocument>.
- "Parliamentary Debates." 1959. June 10, 1959. <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1959061000001?opendocument>.
- Quinn, R.-B. M. 1998. *Public Policy and the Arts: A Comparative Study of Great Britain and Ireland*. Aldershot, Hants, UK; Brookfield: Vt: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Sweetman, G. 1956. "Letter from Minister for Finance to Taoiseach." TAOIS/S 15225C. National Archives of Ireland.
- Urfalino, P. 2011. *L'invention De La Politique Culturelle*. Paris: Fayard/Pluriel.
- Wall, M. 1958. "Letter from Wall to Nolan." TAOIS/S 15225C. National Archives of Ireland.
- Wall, M. 1959a. "Letter from Mervyn Wall to Secretary, RHA." TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.
- Wall, M. 1959b. "Letter from Wall to De Burca." TAOIS/S 14922D. National Archives of Ireland.