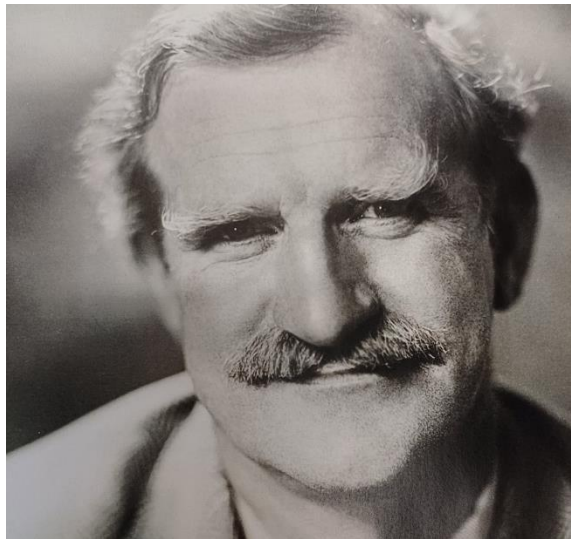


Sam Hanna Bell

In January 2026, the focus of the Now We're Talking project turned to the archival collection of writer and broadcaster Sam Hanna Bell. This blog will provide some details about Bell and his archival collection as well as some updates on the progress of the project so far.

Sam Hanna Bell (1909 – 1990)



Promotional headshot of Sam Hanna Bell taken for BBC, c. 1960.

Sam Hanna Bell was born in Glasgow in 1909, the son of James Hanna Bell and Jane (McIlveen) Bell. His father was a newspaper journalist and editor. In 1918 he moved to Raffery near the banks of Strangford Lough after the untimely death of his father. He spent a few years here with his mother's family before they moved to Belfast. This time spent in rural Co. Down had a significant impact on young Sam with Raffery providing inspiration for much of his writing later in life. Bell never completed any formal secondary level education but perhaps inspired by his father's profession and ability to read the bible in the original Greek, he developed a great interest in reading. His favourite authors were nineteenth century writers who wrote about everyday life, namely Thomas Hardy, William Carleton, and Charles Dickens.

A dedicated autodidact, Bell learned the craft of writing from reading particularly in the Linenhall Library. It was here during the late 1930s and the Second World War that Bell met a small group of artists and writers with whom he found a common bond and fraternity. The group met in the library and socialised regularly in nearby Campbell's Coffee House. These creative characters included long-time collaborator and friend John Boyd, Joseph Tomelty, Richard Rowley, and the poet John Hewitt. Although Bell wanted to be a painter he also wrote short stories.

He began his writing career contributing to a Belfast socialist journal called 'Labour Progress'. Here he championed the cause of the workers and trade unions. A cause close to his heart having worked a steady stream of poorly paid jobs, including night watchman, laboratory technician, and shop assistant. Possibly under the influence of his friends in the Linenhall, he began writing short

stories which were being used by BBC radio for children's programmes. In the 1940s he started a short-lived literary journal in Belfast with John Boyd to promote the writers of Belfast who felt isolated from the rest of the literary scene in Ireland. However, Bell did come to the attention of Seán Ó Faoláin, the founder and editor of the prestigious Dublin literary journal 'The Bell'. Ó Faoláin was very encouraging of this up-and-coming writer and published some of his short stories in the journal.

At the same time as Bell's writing career was taking off, the short stories he wrote for the BBC caught the attention of Louis MacNeice who was visiting from BBC headquarters in London. Bell got a job as Temporary Features Writer and soon became a permanent member of staff as Features Producer. This role led him on a pioneering path to capture the voices of everyday people in Northern Ireland. He firstly did this through his debut feature, 'Their Country's Pride', a programme about the urbanisation of Northern Ireland. This established a highly localised style of writing which focused on the vanishing rural life happening in mid-twentieth century Northern Ireland.



Photograph of Sam Hanna Bell, his secretary and unnamed man in Coneyglen, Glenhull, Greencastle Parish, Co. Tyrone. Photograph taken by Michael J. Murphy, 1962. Courtesy of The National Folklore Collection (A001.32.00025)

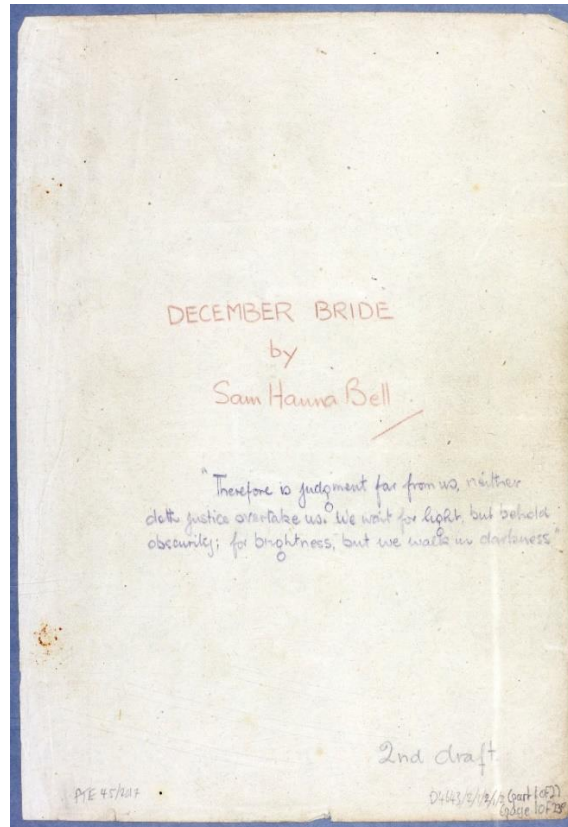
His series 'It's a Brave Step', 'Within Our Province' and 'Country Window' presented stories, songs and poetry using voices from across Ulster. In 1952 he worked closely with Michael J. Murphy collecting stories about fairies from across Northern Ireland for a series called 'Fairy Faith'. No tapes of the episodes survive but some of the interviews recorded for the series are available to listen to on www.duchas.ie. The programmes showcase Bell's groundbreaking use of portable recording equipment which presented the people of Northern Ireland to themselves. The

capturing of ordinary voices and stories made him a very popular fixture of Northern Irish radio for decades.



Photograph of Sam Hanna Bell and Graeme Roberts on Rathlin Island, June 1950.

Bell also continued his writing career, publishing four novels, two collections of short stories and two non-fiction books. His most famous novel is 'December Bride' (1951), a story set in rural Co. Down near the shores of Strangford Lough at the turn of the century. It tells the story of a woman who lives with two men and who must choose one to marry for the sake of her children in a tight-knit religious community. The novel was banned in the Republic of Ireland (a fact Bell was proud of). The novel is highly acclaimed and can be seen as a unique northern example of the Irish literary renaissance of 1950s which included writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, Flann O'Brien, and Brendan Behan. Bell's other novels are 'The Hollow Ball' (1961), 'A Man Flourishing' (1971), and 'Across the Narrow Sea' (1987). These are all historical fiction much like 'December Bride', covering different periods of Ulster's history from the Plantations to The Great Depression of the 1930s. After his retirement from the BBC in 1969 Bell was the Literary Editor of the 'Ulster Tatler' magazine. In this capacity he was able to publish short stories by his friends and young up-and-coming writers giving them a platform for new work.



D4643/2/1/2/1/2 Second draft of December Bride, c. 1950 - c. 1951

The letters, typescripts, manuscripts, radio scripts, drafts, and ephemera collected from the many areas of his life make up the Sam Hanna Bell Papers. The collection is listed with the PRONI reference of D4643 which is the collection that appears just after that of Michael J. Murphy (D4642) on the PRONI catalogue. So far, we have catalogued most of the papers related to his literary works, his broadcasting career, papers from his time with 'Ulster Tatler', and his diaries. Currently the team is focussing on the vast network of correspondence Bell amassed over his life. He corresponded with many distinguished writers and broadcasters such as Louis MacNeice, W. R. Rodgers, Frank McGuinness, and Michael McLaverty. This work will also uncover the connections between the two archives in this project as Bell and Michael J. Murphy corresponded on a range of topics mainly around folklore and potential broadcast ideas.

Follow the regular blogs for further updates about more from the Sam Hanna Bell archive and the Nerve Centre engagement activities as the Now We're Talking project continues.

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