

Derek Bell

Extract from a letter from D Bell to Eibhlín Ní Chathailriabhaigh a longtime friend MOH. Derek and Mary were also very good friends as was Peadar, another of the Chieftains, both of whose work Mary very much admired.

... I wonder if, like me, you've been reading Mary's fascinating book, now in the shops. You get humorously mentioned for your driving!!! She writes marvellously and it is fascinating to hear the sad story from her and not from some lousy newspaper journalist! She writes so very well that no one would ever suspect she wasn't best known as a distinguished writer! Since I spend part of every year in one of our Master's (a fact not known publicly) monasteries, I was deeply interested in the middle part of the book where she explains her joys, problems and illness. We are always taught not to be (or do) extra penances and austerities other than those prescribed by the rules and daily schedule, which is enough, and that the monastery teaches one to achieve balance, and Mary's book really brings out the truth of that lesson, i.e., not to start embroidering & developing the teachings before one can obey them simply and correctly! Mary also has a marvellously discreet sense of humour. I was amazed at the number of records she made and also how widely she travelled off the usual concert maps....

How much I enjoyed the concert at the Gaiety (Dublin). Indeed, I have not enjoyed a concert as much in years. I had some misgivings when I saw the instruments sitting on the platform at the beginning, and like many, I wondered what such a pop backing would do to Mary and how would Mary suit the pop stuff; but I must say she won me over completely immediately. I've never heard from anyone else such perfect clear diction, (and I was right at the back of the D circle) mood, variety nor such a thrilling range of vocal effect and colour variety. Of course she was marvellous in her own music as always, but I found the pop stuff very powerful, amazingly fresh and not only did she choose her material expertly but I found it all (unlike any other pop artist or art) inspiring, relaxing and restful – not nerve shattering. The arrangements were apt, discreet, unobtrusive and yet creative – quite the opposite to what I'd feared they might be. I'd like to have heard more harp music throughout but like Acton said in the Times, you didn't have to listen to the voice, it was there with you, without effort. The fact that Mary could sing that entire evening without fault when she did have a slight frog in her throat should be a tremendous lesson to all singers. It takes a lot of technique to sing through a cold. I think her whole concert has a message, a very high spiritual vibration and she has a glorious future on her own merits.

I think Mary's own songs reveal a truly amazing talent both for creating melody and setting words. Maybe even genius. I'd love to hear more of her own work