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## The Mexican *Pas de Trois* of Flann O'Brien, Graham Greene, and Shirley Temple: The Background to *At Swim-Two-Birds*'s Back Cover Blurb

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Pádraig Ó Méalóid investigates the circumstances under which one of the leading novelists of the twentieth century, Graham Greene, came to write a blurb for the back cover of the first edition of Flann O'Brien's debut novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published by Longmans, Green & Co. in 1939.

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It is an enduring truism in Irish literary circles that Graham Greene was involved in getting Flann O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published by Longmans, Green & Co. of London in 1939. Consider the following six statements:

A.M. Heath<sup>1</sup> liked the book. They sent it first to Collins<sup>2</sup> and acquired a rejection but then fortunately tried Longman's [sic]<sup>3</sup> where Graham Greene, who was already the author of *Brighton Rock* and *England Made Me*, was a reader. Greene's enthusiasm carried the day, A.M. Heath soon reporting to the author that Longman's [sic] had said they were excited about his MS and would like to meet him.<sup>4</sup>

Graham Greene, then a publisher's reader, recommended its acceptance.<sup>5</sup>

His first book, *At Swim Two Birds* (1939), was edited by Graham Greene.<sup>6</sup>

It owed its publication to the fluke of Graham Greene's having been assigned to read it by Longmans (of London).<sup>7</sup>

It was Graham Greene, moonlighting as a reader for Longman's [sic], who first spotted the potential of an unsolicited manuscript, oddly titled *At Swim-Two-Birds*, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, coincidentally the publication year of *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>8</sup>

It was published in 1939 on the strength of an enthusiastic publisher's reader's report by Graham Greene, who said that he read the manuscript 'with continual

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<sup>1</sup> A.M. Heath & Company, Limited of 188 Piccadilly, London, were – and indeed still are – Flann O'Brien's agents.

<sup>2</sup> It was actually the author himself who sent the book to Collins, the only time he directly approached a UK publisher before employing the services of A.M. Heath as agents.

<sup>3</sup> A.M. Heath had actually tried a few other publishers before sending the manuscript to Longmans, Green & Co., including Peter Davies, Chatto & Windus, and Cresset Press. See Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 86.

<sup>5</sup> 'At Swim-Two-Birds,' in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*, ed. Jenny Stringer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32. Available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780192122711.001.0001/acref-9780192122711-e-138>.

<sup>6</sup> Review of Anthony Cronin's *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, *Publishers Weekly* (29 December 1997): <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780880641838>.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph O'Neil, 'The Last Laugh: A Comic Genius Who Died Young Is Finally Getting His Due,' *The Atlantic* (May 2008): <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/05/the-last-laugh/306769/>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert McCrum, 'The 100 Best Novels: No 64 – *At Swim-Two-Birds* by Flann O'Brien (1939),' *The Guardian* (8 December 2014): <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/08/100-best-novels-at-swim-two-birds-flann-o-brien-obrien-dermot-trellis>. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* was published on 4 May 1939 by Faber and Faber of London, less than two months after *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

excitement, amusement, and the kind of glee one experiences when people smash china on the stage.’<sup>9</sup>

The above list is by no means exhaustive. Although there are some interesting variations in these snippets, the general thrust is that in 1938 Greene was working as a publisher’s reader at Longmans, Green & Co., and when the manuscript for *At Swim-Two-Birds* arrived unannounced it was through his recommendation that they decided to take a chance and publish it.

In this note, I attempt to ascertain Greene’s role in the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In doing so, I will show how Greene’s friend, the publisher Tom Burns, brought Greene and fellow Catholic author Evelyn Waugh into Longmans,<sup>10</sup> and how Greene (and possibly even Burns and Waugh) contributed to the publicity material and paratexts associated with *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

On 13 March 1939, Longmans, Green & Co. published *At Swim-Two-Birds* with the following 300-word endorsement on the back cover of the dustjacket:

What Graham Greene says about this book:-

‘I read it with continual excitement, amusement and the kind of glee one experiences when people smash china on the stage. It is in the line of *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*; its amazing spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously as it were, all the literary traditions of Ireland – the Celtic legend (in the stories of Finn), the popular adventure novels (of a Mr Tracy), the nightmare element as you get it in Joyce, the ancient poetry of Bardic Ireland, and the working-class poetry of the absurd Harry Casey.<sup>11</sup> On all these the author imposes the unity of his own humorous vigour, and the technique he employs is as efficient as it is original. We have had books inside books before now, and characters who are given life outside their fiction, but O’Nolan takes Pirandello and Gide a long way further; the screw is turned until you have, (a) the narrator writing a book about a man called Trellis who is, (b) writing a book about certain characters who, (c) are turning

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<sup>9</sup> Peter McDermott, ‘6/16/54: The 1<sup>st</sup> Bloomsday,’ *The Irish Echo* (14 June 2021): <https://www.irishecho.com/2021/6/6-16-54-the-1st-bloomsday>.

<sup>10</sup> In this note I will be using the term ‘Longmans’ to refer to ‘Longmans, Green & Co.’ even though the imprint didn’t change to ‘Longmans’ until 1959 (and again to ‘Longman’ in 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Actually Jem Casey in the book, of course. It is not clear if this was the original name of the character, or a mistake on the part of Greene. The 1960 reprint hardback edition by MacGibbon & Kee of London also makes an error on the back cover, naming the character Jim Casey, which is at least only one letter out. The 1960 edition also changes the reference to O’Nolan we see here to O’Brien.

the tables on Trellis by writing about him. It is a wild fantastic magnificently comic notion, but looking back afterwards one realises that by no other method could the realistic, the legendary and the novelette have been worked together.<sup>12</sup>

Greene had worked as a publisher's reader for Eyre & Spottiswoode in his younger days,<sup>13</sup> but by the time *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published in 1939 he had already had eight novels published, including *England Made Me* (1935) and *Brighton Rock* (1938), so was probably both too busy and too successful to be working for anyone as a first reader for incoming manuscripts from first-time writers. *At Swim-Two-Birds* came to Longmans recommended by A.M. Heath, which might have meant that it would have started its journey on a higher rung than a book straight off the slush pile.<sup>14</sup> In such a scenario, it's possible that the first reader was someone attached to Longmans, rather than a freelancer making a few extra shillings reading cold submissions. Even allowing for this conjecture, however, it simply isn't plausible that they would have drafted in someone of Greene's experience and stature to be that first reader.

Furthermore, the inside front flap of the dustjacket for the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* confirms that the advance reader and the back-cover blurb writer – Greene – were two different people<sup>15</sup>:

This is a phenomenal book. 'I was reminded sometimes of James Joyce, sometimes of Sterne,' reported our reader – and Mr Graham Greene quite independently makes the same comparison (see the back of this wrapper).

We need add nothing to Mr Greene's note except a promise that anyone who lets himself wander into Mr O'Brien's<sup>16</sup> fantastical world will come under the spell of its magic and will be amused, bewildered, and excited long before he knows what it all means. One thing he can be certain of: Flann O'Brien is something very like a genius.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1939), dustjacket back cover.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Burns, *The Use of Memory: Publishing and Further Pursuits* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 58.

<sup>14</sup> According to Wikipedia: 'In publishing, a slush pile is a set of unsolicited query letters or manuscripts that have either been directly sent to a publisher by an author, or which have been delivered via a literary agent representing the author who may or may not be familiar to the publisher. The responsibility of sifting through slush piles is usually reserved either to editor assistants or to outside contractors called publisher's readers or "first readers".' 'Slush Pile,' Wikipedia, last modified 28 July 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slush\\_pile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slush_pile).

<sup>15</sup> The inside back flap of the dustjacket for the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is completely blank, however, so there is no further information hiding there.

<sup>16</sup> The author is referred to as 'O'Nolan' on the back of the dustjacket, but as 'O'Brien' on the inside front flap.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, dustjacket inside front flap.

Longmans did advert to their reader before this, in their correspondence with A.M. Heath, the author's agents. This correspondence was lost in the London Blitz, during what was called the Second Great Fire of London on 29–30 December 1940. The Blitz completely destroyed Longmans' offices in Paternoster Row, which contained not only the records of their correspondence, but also their warehousing department and the remaining bound copies of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. But we are able largely to reconstruct that correspondence through the parallel correspondence between the author and his agents. On Thursday 22 September 1938, Audrey Heath of A.M. Heath wrote to Brian O'Nolan:

The particular member of Longman Green's staff with whom we dealt in connection with 'AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS' is away on holiday but Mr Longman has written us today as follows:

'The "minor points of construction and language" referred to in our letter of 14<sup>th</sup> September arose from a sentence in our special reader's report: he says:

The book may seem at times unnecessarily coarse, and a few passages could be cut without harm. Otherwise its only fault seems to me an obscure and rather hurried ending, and a title far more difficult than anything in the book.

Unfortunately he gave us no references to pages in the MS.

Would the author be good enough to see whether any phrases are "unnecessarily coarse" and whether our reader's next two criticisms appeal to him? The title, I agree, is somewhat obscure! I would add, that this particular reader is a well-known person, young and by no means squeamish, so that his remarks about coarseness may be worth paying attention to. I am sorry that the author cannot get over here at present; we are all rather excited over his MS and would like to meet him.<sup>18</sup>

When Mr Longman mentions 'our special reader,' whom he describes as 'a well-known person, young and by no means squeamish,' who is he talking about? Is it the one mentioned on the flap of the dustcover, who 'was reminded sometimes of James Joyce, sometimes of Sterne,' or is it Graham Greene, also mentioned on the front cover flap? Or, just possibly, someone else entirely? And is it possible to work out who it might have been?

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<sup>18</sup> Everything in quotation marks after 'Mr Longman has written us today as follows' is Heath quoting from Longmans' letter to A.M. Heath about the book. O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 9–10.

## How Graham Greene Came to Longmans

We can begin by ascertaining Greene's connections to Longmans, which are linked to his desire to visit Mexico to write about the suppression of the Catholic church there. Greene had been interested in going to Mexico since at least 1936, and he had been in discussions with various parties about such an undertaking, including a number of British publishers. He wrote to his brother Hugh on 24 May 1936:

Later in the new year I may be getting off to Mexico; negotiations are on hand for a book on the Mexican Revolution and the Catholic church. [...] Sheed<sup>19</sup> promises an introduction to one of the heads of the Catholic party.<sup>20</sup>

On 30 July, Greene wrote to Hugh that: 'Mexico remains uncertain. My agent's asked Sheed for £500 and Sheed can't make up his mind till he's been across to New York again and talked with the mysterious Fr Miranda.'<sup>21</sup> On 29 August of the same year, he wrote to his mother, Marion Greene, to say:

When everything's settled down, I shall try to take a week's holiday. I've got to learn Spanish too [in] the next few weeks, for rather to my agent's surprise Sheed & Ward, the Catholic publishers, have accepted our terms, £500 advance on English language rights, for a Mexican book on the religious persecution, and D.V. [*Deo volente*] I shall be going off in January.<sup>22</sup>

Greene seemed determined to put obstacles in his own way, however. On 26 December 1936, he told Hugh that Chatto & Windus had offered him the editorship of a forthcoming publication called *Night and Day*.<sup>23</sup> This was to be a weekly magazine along the lines of *The New Yorker*, looking to take over *Punch*'s position as Britain's leading humorous magazine. *Night and Day* would include work by John Betjeman, Gerald Kersh, Anthony Powell, Elizabeth Bowen (as the magazine's regular drama critic), Evelyn Waugh, and, of course, Greene himself, as film reviewer.<sup>24</sup> The first issue was published on 1 July 1937; the magazine only ran for twenty-six issues and was last published on 23

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<sup>19</sup> Frank Sheed of Sheed and Ward, a publishing house he founded in London in 1926 with his wife, Maisie Ward, both Catholic activists.

<sup>20</sup> Qtd in Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume 1: 1904-1939* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 656.

<sup>21</sup> Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene*, 656.

<sup>22</sup> Graham Greene, *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene (London: Abacus, 2008), 77-8.

<sup>23</sup> Sherry, *Life of Graham Greene*, 608.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Murray Davis, 'Contributions to *Night and Day* by Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, and Anthony Powell,' *Studies in the Novel* 3, no. 4 (1971): 401-4.

December 1937. Just over a month later, on 29 January 1938, Greene finally set out for Mexico. But much else of consequence was to take place before his departure.

In the 28 October 1937 issue of *Night and Day*, Greene reviewed nine-year-old actress Shirley Temple's recently released film, *Wee Willie Winkie*, in such ungallant and suggestive terms that it caused an enormous furore:

[I]n *Wee Willie Winkie*, wearing short kilts, [Temple] is a complete totsy. Watch her swaggering stride across the Indian barrack-square: hear the gasp of excited expectation from her antique audience when the sergeant's palm is raised: watch the way she measures a man with agile studio eyes, with dimpled depravity. [...] Her admirers – middle-aged men and clergymen – respond to her dubious coquetry, to the sight of her well-shaped and desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality, only because the safety curtain of story and dialogue drops between their intelligence and their desire.<sup>25</sup>

Almost inevitably, this review led to legal action. The American and British wings of Twentieth Century-Fox, as well as representatives acting for Temple herself, took an action against Greene, *Night and Day Magazines Ltd*, *Chatto & Windus*, and *Hazell, Watson and Viney, Ltd*, who were, respectively, the writer, publication, publisher, and printer involved in producing the issue in question.<sup>26</sup>

The libel case appeared before the King's Bench on 22 March 1938, with the Lord Chief Justice Lord Hewart presiding, and was reported on in the Law Reports section of *The Times* on 23 May that year.<sup>27</sup> There was a settlement of £3500, of which £2000 went to Shirley Temple, £1000 to the American film company, and £500 to the British film company. Part of the report read:

*His Lordship* – Who is the author of this article?

*Mr Holmes*<sup>28</sup> – Mr Graham Greene.

*His Lordship* – Is he within the jurisdiction?

*Mr Holmes* – I am afraid I do not know, my Lord.

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<sup>25</sup> Graham Greene, 'The Films,' *Night And Day* (28 October 1937): 31.

<sup>26</sup> Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: The Bodley Head, 1980), 61.

<sup>27</sup> 'Law Reports,' *The Times* (23 May 1938).

<sup>28</sup> Valentine Holmes appeared on behalf of all the defence parties except the printers.

Theobald Mathew, who was appearing for the printers, was then asked if he knew where Greene was.

*His Lordship* – Can you tell me where Mr Greene is?

*Mr Mathew* – I have no information on the subject.

*His Lordship* – This libel is simply a gross outrage, and I will take care to see that suitable attention is directed to it.<sup>29</sup>

By this last sentence, the Lord Chief Justice meant that he was sending the papers in the case on to the Director of Public Prosecutions, presumably in the hope that they would pursue a criminal prosecution against Greene for libel. But Greene was no longer 'within the jurisdiction.' By March 1938, a settlement was reached, but by then *Night and Day* had folded, having closed at the end of December 1937,<sup>30</sup> and Greene had, apparently, fled the country. A stroke of luck, and the intervention of a friend, meant he had finally made it to Mexico.

At the end of 1935, Chilean-born Catholic publisher Tom Burns (1906–1995), having worked at British publishing house Sheed & Ward since its foundation in 1926, strolled across the road in London's Paternoster Row to offer his services to his friend Bobbie Longman, and in January 1936 began working at Longmans, Green & Co., where Longman was head.<sup>31</sup> As well as coaxing a number of Sheed & Ward authors to join him at Longmans, Burns wanted to try to get work out of two of his old friends and fellow Catholics, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. But Greene's novels were contracted to William Heinemann Ltd at the time, and Waugh was similarly committed to Chapman & Hall, where his father, Arthur Waugh, had been the company's managing director from 1902 to 1930.<sup>32</sup>

Having been released from his commitment to *Night and Day* by its closure, Greene was now free to commit himself to his trip to Mexico. There are some schools of thought that hold that it was more than just a coincidence that he happened to be conveniently out of reach when that court case was unfolding. A 2007 article in *The Independent*, for example, argues that 'Greene in fact fled to Mexico to avoid being sent to prison after the Lord Chief Justice who presided over his infamous civil libel trial with the child star

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<sup>29</sup> *The Times* (23 May 1938), as cited by Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> The board of *Night and Day* had been trying to source extra funding, but they failed, no doubt due to Greene's review and the forthcoming libel case, and the forthcoming closure of the magazine was announced to the staff on 1 November 1937. Christopher Hawtree (ed.), *Night and Day* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Burns, *The Use of Memory*, 1–56.

<sup>32</sup> Burns, *The Use of Memory*, 56.



Shirley Temple decided he should be prosecuted for criminal libel.<sup>33</sup> The article quotes at length from 'the lost autobiography of Greene's close friend, the cinema pioneer Alberto Cavalcanti':

Greene had implied [Temple] played deliberately to 'a public of licentious old men, ready to enjoy the fine flavour of such an unripe, charming little creature [...]. Graham was warned that the Americans producing the film had introduced a writ of libel against him, meaning that not only would the backers of *Night and Day* pay a large fine, but he, Graham himself, faced a prison sentence. The only solution was to find a country without extradition. They chose Mexico and our poor Graham went away very quickly indeed.'<sup>34</sup>

Yet, Mexico wasn't simply a country without extradition; it had been firmly in Greene's sights since 1936, long before the Temple affair.

Although Sheed & Ward had commissioned Greene's work on Mexico in August 1936, and promised him an advance of £500, by the end of 1937 they had changed their minds and backed out. Greene's usual publishers, William Heinemann, weren't interested in taking the book on either. However, Greene and Burns had been friends since 1929; after discussing the matter over drinks, Burns commissioned the book for Longmans<sup>35</sup> and even persuaded their board to come up with the advance of £500.<sup>36</sup> We don't know whether Greene and Burns's chat over drinks also involved any discussion of Greene's possible desire to absent himself from England, but it certainly might have. The book was originally to be called *The Position of the Church in Mexico*, but was fortunately renamed to the somewhat punchier *The Lawless Roads: A Mexican Journey*.<sup>37</sup>

To recap, then: Greene's review of *Wee Willie Winkie* appeared at the end of October 1937, *Night and Day* finished its run at the end of December 1937, and Greene left for Mexico at the end of January 1938 – with the help of an old friend at Longmans – just two months ahead of the hearing on 22 March 1938. He returned to England after four months, on 25 May, by which time it appears that the hue and cry had died down. The conjunction of *Night and Day* closing, Sheed & Ward backing out of their commitment,

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Johnson, 'Shirley Temple Scandal Was Real Reason Graham Greene Fled to Mexico,' *The Independent* (18 November 2007): <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/shirley-temple-scandal-was-real-reason-graham-greene-fled-to-mexico-400856.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, 'Shirley Temple Scandal.'

<sup>35</sup> Richard Greene, *Russian Roulette: The Life and Times of Graham Greene* (London: Little, Brown, 2020), 112.

<sup>36</sup> Burns, *The Use of Memory*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Greene, *Articles of Faith: The Collected Tablet Journalism of Graham Greene*, ed. Ian Thomson (Oxford: Signal Books, 2006), xv.

and Burns at Longmans wanting to get Greene to write something for them all happened at about the same time. And that is how Graham Greene came to be within the orbit of Longmans around the same time that A.M. Heath sent the manuscript of *At Swim-Two-Birds* to the press for consideration.

### Conclusion from the Foregoing

Part of Burns's self-proclaimed mission at Longmans was to change the company from what he described as 'an almost Victorian establishment which might have been dealing with any commodity but happened to be producing books,'<sup>38</sup> into something more modern. Although I have no direct evidence for this, it is my conjecture that one of his innovations there was *First and Last: A Review with a Difference*, a 32-page roughly foolscap-sized free publication used to advertise their books, containing long extracts, reviews, and news of recent and forthcoming titles.<sup>39</sup> I am fortunate to own *First and Last* numbers 3 and 4 which are dated, respectively, November 1938 and May 1939. There is a preamble in issue number 3 which begins '*First and Last* may look like a weekly, but actually comes out about twice a year,' an assertion that is certainly borne out by the dating of the two consecutive copies in my possession. And on page 30 of *First and Last* 3, on their Things to Come page, there's this:

#### Hunting the Snark

The hunt for new talent will continue next year, and already we have a view of two young writers of quite exceptional worth. First, Brian O'Nolan, whose MS. is called *At Swim-two-birds* [sic], and whose book will be called that too, for all we know at present. Many of us read it here and passed the MS. to and fro with comments imbued with excitement and a certain mystification.

#### 'At Swim-two-birds' [sic]

The test of a good deal of true art is that it impresses and excites even before it is understood. So with Mr O'Nolan's work. In the end we asked Mr Graham Greene to advise us about it. And this is what he said: 'I have never found it more difficult to report on a book, and never have I been more certain that a book should be published. I read it with continual excitement, amusement, and the kind of glee one

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<sup>38</sup> Burns, *The Use of Memory*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> This publication is so obscure that the listing for it in the British Library's catalogue is incorrect, because they extrapolated from their only issue, vol. 1, no. 4, issued in May 1939, that it was a monthly publication, and that therefore the first issue had appeared in February 1939. This is not correct.

experiences when people smash china on the stage. ... It is in the line of *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*; its amazing high spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously, as it were, all the literary traditions of Ireland—the Celtic legend (in the stories of Finn), the popular adventure novels (of a Mr. Tracy), the nightmare element as you get it in Joyce, the ancient poetry of bardic Ireland, and the working class poetry of the absurd navy Casey. On all these the author imposes the unity of his own humorous vigour, and the technique he employs is as efficient as it is original. ... I think it is a book in a thousand, and well worth the risk of publication.'<sup>40</sup>

There is also a piece on that same page about Greene's *Lawless Roads: A Mexican Journey* [sic], which they expected to be forthcoming the following year. *First and Last* 4 in May 1939 contained a mention of *At Swim-Two-Birds* on their 'On This and That' page, quoting a piece in *The Bookseller* about Longmans' advertisement for the book in the *New Statesman*, which advertisement is also included on page 25. That same issue also contains a two page extract from Greene's *The Lawless Roads: A Mexican Journey*, which Longmans published in March 1939, as well as a one-page review of it by Waugh.

*At Swim-Two-Birds* was also published in March 1939 to good reviews, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Observer*, *The New Statesman and Nation*, and *The Dublin Magazine*, as well as those mentioned above, all of which are included in Rüdiger Imhof's *Alive Alive O! Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds*.<sup>41</sup> Despite this positive initial reception, Patience Ross of A.M. Heath wrote to O'Nolan on 6 July 1939 to tell him that sales in the four months since publication amounted to only 244 copies. Even the intervention of Greene, who was obviously genuinely impressed by the book, couldn't persuade the book-buying public to take a chance on a strange little novel by an unknown Irish author.

Did Burns parlay his helping Greene out of his little problem (by having Longmans fund his 1938 trip to Mexico) into persuading him to write a report on *At Swim-Two-Birds*? There is, unfortunately, almost no paper trail here, as none of the biographies of Greene mention *At Swim-Two-Birds*, nor does Asa Briggs's *A History of Longmans and Their Books 1724–1990* mention either Burns or Greene, let alone Flann O'Brien.<sup>42</sup> And any correspondence, except for the carbon copies kept by the authors, was irretrievably destroyed in the London Blitz in 1940. However, Burns devotes an entire chapter of his book *The Use of Memory* to his reminiscences of Greene and Waugh, and his time

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<sup>40</sup> 'Things to Come,' *First and Last* 3 (November 1938), 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Alive Alive O! Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds*, ed. Rüdiger Imhof (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), 42–6.

<sup>42</sup> Asa Briggs, *A History of Longmans and Their Books 1724–1990: Longevity in Publishing* (Delaware: London & Oak Knoll Press, 2008).

at Longmans.<sup>43</sup> There are a number of different voices involved in the various pieces of writing emanating from Longmans' about *At Swim-Two-Birds*, only one of which is definitively identified, that of Graham Greene. But I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that the other reader at Longmans referred to on the inside front flap of the dustjacket was Evelyn Waugh, and that the omniscient publisher's voice who wrote the copy there and in *First & Last* 3 was Tom Burns. As is often the case when dealing with events where much of the corroborating evidence was destroyed, there is quite a bit of conjecture in that belief, but I like to believe that there's at least a few grains of truth in it none the less.

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<sup>43</sup> Tom Burns, 'At the Sign of the Ship,' in *The Use of Memory: Publishing and Further Pursuits* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 56-66.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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