



The Parish Review
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Frank McNally, 'Art for Flann's Sake? A Possible Pseudonym for Michael Victor O'Nolan,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 1–10.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.11674>



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Art for Flann's Sake? A Possible Pseudonym for Michael Victor O'Nolan

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For several years just before the First World War, a columnist called 'Art Flann' was a regular contributor to northern Irish provincial newspapers including the *Strabane Chronicle* and *Ulster Herald*. Erudite, argumentative, often satirical, he was also invariably – as a later Flann O'Brien (or Myles na gCopaleen) would have said – sound on the national question. He wrote on a wide range of subjects, including education, the courts, the Orange Order, and the coming of Home Rule, but a common thread was the misgovernment of Ireland as part of the UK. The pseudonym's career lasted from about 1908 to 1914, ending just as the future Flann O'Brien (then an infant) and a fast-expanding O'Nolan family moved from Strabane to Dublin. This note considers the possibility that Michael Victor O'Nolan, then crown servant and home-schooling patriarch of the O'Nolan clan, was the man behind the *nom de plume*.

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This note has its origins in a public question posed on Twitter some months ago by a Trinity College historian Georgina Laragy. She asked:

Does anyone know anything about Flann O'Brien's father, Michael Vincent [sic] O'Nolan?¹ Have read he was an unpublished writer; that he concealed his republican views because of his job as a HM Customs Officer? But does anyone know if he wrote under a *nom de plume*, Art Flann?²

I did not know the answer to this. Neither did any of the people who replied to the tweet. But it set me reading the columns of Art Flann, which appeared in a group of northern Irish newspapers (northern with a small 'n,' because there was no Border then) including the Omagh-based *Ulster Herald* and the *Strabane Chronicle*, for several years before the start of the First World War.

And my conclusion to date – Plot Spoiler Alert – is that I still don't know if Art Flann was Michael Victor O'Nolan, a possibility that would suggest an intriguing forelife for a famous literary pseudonym. It does, however, seem highly plausible.

Michael Victor O'Nolan

Michael Victor O'Nolan was born near Omagh in 1875 but soon moved with his family to Belfast, where he studied in St Malachy's College and later Queen's University. After graduating from Queen's, he joined the British Civil Service, in the Customs and Excise branch, and was posted to Strabane – ironically, perhaps, for a Customs man, because again, it was not yet a border town then, although it soon would be. While there, he married Agnes Gormley, also from Omagh. And in between starting a large family – there were twelve children eventually, including the future Flann O'Brien – and doing all the travel his job required, he threw himself into the cultural life of Strabane and Tyrone: organising Irish classes, staging the town's first ever *Feis* in 1903, and, a year later, becoming inaugural county chairman of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Not alone county chairman, he also became chairman of the Ulster GAA. And typically, he seems to have applied himself with great energy to both jobs. But when he relinquished the roles circa 1908, he appears to have cut all links with them. He had no further dealings with Gaelic games.

This was the subject of some pained commentary 100 years later, when Tyrone GAA celebrated its centenary. By then, the county team were reigning All-Ireland Gaelic

¹ His actual middle name was Victor.

² Unfortunately, Dr Laragy's Twitter account @glaragy_history has since been deactivated, and the original tweet lost with it.

football champions for the first time, defeating Armagh in the 2003 final. Having spent most of the previous century as poor relations, they were now an emerging super-power. Looking back, the Tyrone newspapers proudly recorded the formative contribution of Michael Victor, noting that he was father of the famous writer Flann O'Brien. But as Joseph Martin laments in his history of the GAA in Tyrone:

It is quite remarkable that O'Nolan, who was so active in both Tyrone and Ulster GAA circles until 1908, seems to have taken no part whatsoever in the affairs of the association after that date. It may well have been his commitments to a young family, coupled with his transfer to Glasgow, which prevented him from being involved in GAA administration. What is difficult to understand, however, is that a man who was so totally engrossed in GAA affairs appears to have made a complete break with the association in later life.³

Martin also notes that, in his 1973 memoir *Óige an Dearthár .i. Myles na gCopaleen* (The Youth of the Brother i.e. Myles na gCopaleen),⁴ Ciarán Ó Nualláin made 'not a single reference to the GAA.'⁵ Adding insult to injury, one of the few references to sport in Ciarán's memoir is to croquet – the antithesis of everything the manly games of GAA were supposed to eradicate from Ireland. During the family's years in Tullamore, according to Ciarán, Michael Victor and his children often played croquet on the front lawn.⁶ From this and other details, it seems O'Nolan Snr may have been a believer in the doctrine of St Paul: 'When I was a child, I spoke and reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things.' The same may have applied to his short-lived newspaper columnist career, if it did indeed happen.

One subject Ciarán Ó Nualláin does go into at length in the memoir is that of his father's library. This, we are told, contained everything Thomas Hardy ever wrote, multiple volumes of Robert Louis Stevenson, the complete works of Shakespeare, and so on.⁷ And in what may be an important detail – to which we'll return – O'Nolan Snr was also said to be a devotee of the Irish-language tutorials of Eugene O'Growney: once ordering 75 copies of an O'Growney book for the Strabane branch of the Gaelic League.

³ Joseph Martin, *The GAA in Tyrone: 1884-1984* (Tyrone: Tyrone County Board, 1984): <https://tyronegaa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Tyrone-History-1884-1984.pdf>.

⁴ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *Óige an dearthár .i. Myles na gCopaleen* (Baile Átha Cliath : Foilseacháin Náisiúnta Teoranta, 1973).

⁵ Martin, *The GAA in Tyrone*.

⁶ Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, ed. Niall O'Nolan, trans. Róisín Ní Nualláin (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998), 48.

⁷ Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years*, 42.

Art Flann

The lifespan of the 'Art Flann' pseudonym appears to have run from about 1908 until early 1914, with diminishing frequency after 1912. It featured primarily in the *Ulster Herald*, a weekly newspaper based in Omagh, and the material was then reprinted in the *Strabane Chronicle* and *Donegal News*, part of the same group. He was a wide-ranging columnist, writing about everything from ancient Irish history to contemporary world politics, although he rarely if ever mentioned sport. He had serious ideas about the need for educational reform. That would have been in keeping with Michael Victor O'Nolan, a man who home-schooled his children. The inadequacy of the Northern court system was another running theme.

But Art Flann could be humorous too, on occasion. He was also often satirical. And serious or joking, to borrow a cliché from Myles na gCopaleen, he was always sound on the national question. He supported Irish Home Rule and considered the British overlordship of Ireland intolerable, an opinion Michael Victor shared and would indeed have had to keep quiet about if writing under his real name. He could sometimes be vicious, as in the following prolonged character assassination of an elderly judge, which – a bit like the Cheshire Cat in reverse – begins by describing the subject's smile in minute detail as a prelude to broadening the attack to the rest of his character and conduct:

The first thing that struck me about Sir Francis Brady on the very first occasion on which I saw him was his smile. It is not a smile that is seen every day. It does not at all come within the category of the ordinary smiles that men smile and enjoy. It is purely and peculiarly a 'Sir Francisean' smile, as purely and peculiarly as if his honour, the County Court Judge of Tyrone, had it specially protected under all the pains and penalties of the Patent Laws. It possesses nothing of the calm quiet that betokens the thinker, and has no trace of the merry twinkle of the humourist born. It is as free from the dry acidity of the cynic as it is from the supercilious lip-curve of the self-conscious egotist. It is far removed from the indeterminate cautiousness that marks the scarcely perceptible facial contraction of the statesman, and yet is even further away from the frank unconcealedness of the impetuous and the rash.

Nevertheless, more than any of these does it reveal the character and course of conduct of the man. Before I heard Sir Francis speak, before I witnessed his namby-pambying with legal argument, before I beheld the irresponsible tiddling with the chief duty of a judge – to adjudicate – I had formed my opinion of the manner of man he was. The smile that, in displaying a fine set of teeth, displayed also the weak lines of a naturally weak mouth, showed at the same time the weakness

of a character that, in the series of contrasts it presents, would prove an interesting study for the psychologist.⁸

This is reminiscent of another infamous description of a face – the much shorter one Myles na Gopaleen would write in 1953 about the Minister for Local Government, his then political boss, Patrick Smith. Lampooning Smith's difficulties when faced with any intellectual challenge, Myles sneered:

The great jaw would drop, the ruined graveyard of tombstone teeth would be revealed, the eyes would roll, and the malt-eroded voice would say: 'Hah?'⁹

That column, as we know, finally earned Brian O'Nolan a forced early retirement from his day job in the civil service.¹⁰

As a fellow newspaper columnist, reading Art Flann's diatribe about Sir Francis, my first reaction was to wonder if his subject was still alive at the time – 1908. Because, of all the people journalists might risk libelling in print, judges would tend to be at or near the bottom of the list. In fact, this one was still alive in 1908, but in his early 80s and frail. A few months after Art Flann's attack on him, while crossing a street in Dublin, Judge Brady was knocked down by a bicycle (perhaps one of Flann O'Brien's homicidal models, before its time?). Although he survived the accident, he went into a deep decline thereafter and died in 1909.

Political Art

One of Art Flann's longer essays ran under the one-word headline: 'Woman.' It was a series of articles, written in the context of the debate on women's suffrage. And he took a progressive view on the issue, so much so that it attracted this angry 'letter to the editor' from a pseudonymous reader:

Dear Sir, I read with irate interest some articles which appeared in your paper under the heading of 'Woman.' The author of this extraordinary critique on the opposite sex, 'Art Flann,' doubtless is possessed with the idea that he possesses the 'art' of effectively laying before the public an historical resume showing what woman has and is doing to justify her claim to equality with man. He set himself to the task

⁸ Art Flann, 'A Day With Sir Francis,' *Ulster Herald* (27 June 1908): 5.

⁹ Myles na Gopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (5 February 1953): 4.

¹⁰ See Jonathan Foster and Elliott Mills, 'Bureaucratic Poetics: Brian O'Nolan and the Irish Civil Service,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.8883>.

of proving that woman exercises a great influence for good or evil on man, in spite of the fact that she is the 'weaker sex.' Before I proceed to rap 'Art Flann' over the knuckles for playing the enemy's game and giving the 'down-trodden, man-persecuted woman' another excuse for making herself ridiculous in the eyes of the world, I would first like to inform him that he has made a grave mistake in trying to prove the impossible – that woman is, after all, the predominant partner. [...] If a woman can be a member of a board of guardians, there is no reason why she should not project herself into the House of Commons. [...] God help us then!¹¹

The letter concludes: 'We do not desire to be governed by women, and many women shirk from undertaking the responsibility involved in the exercise of the vote.'

This response to 'Art Flann' was signed with a single French name, 'Jacques,' which could be a cover for anybody. But, interestingly, there was a national newspaper columnist of the time who also used 'Jacques' as his pseudonym. That was the real-life John Rice, from Cork, who as drama critic for the *Irish Independent* was highly influential. He was also an arch conservative, with no time for *avant-garde* theatre, and no objection to censorship for the moral good. If it was he taking time out to write letters to the *Ulster Herald*, that would suggest Art Flann had developed a national profile. Then again, it could have been a different 'Jacques' entirely.

Art Flann was not always so progressive. In November 1911, for example, he wrote approvingly of a public bonfire of English newspapers by Limerick's self-appointed moral police:

It was with no small sense of gratification that every man and woman in Ireland with any regard for the Christian morality of the nation read of the drastic action taken by the Catholic young men of Limerick to stop in that city the sale of degrading and indecent English Sunday newspapers. The seizing of the parcels at the railway stations and their public burning drew the attention of the whole country to a weekly growing evil. The combination of newsagents and newsboys, pledged not to sell these cross-channel prints, was a natural consequence of an action for which both the promoters and the participants are entitled to national gratitude. A further outcome of Limerick's splendid step was the great meeting in Dublin on Sunday last, and the practical procedure it proposes pursuing in the metropolis.¹²

¹¹ Jacques, 'Woman,' Letter to the Editor, 'Our Readers' Views,' *Strabane Chronicle* (30 July 1910): 7.

¹² Art Flann, 'Random Reflections,' *Ulster Herald* (11 November 1911): 2.

That last meeting set up something called the Dublin Vigilance Committee (DVA) for the suppression of 'immoral' writing, which had unfortunate consequences for a certain James Joyce. A year later, a thousand copies of his still unpublished *Dubliners* were pulped by a disapproving printer, John Falconer. An angry Joyce, *en route* to exile, wrote the broadside 'Gas from a Burner' – originally titled 'Mr Falconer Addresses the Vigilance Committee' – imagining the printer and publisher defending themselves before a meeting of the DVA.¹³

Like many columnists, Art Flann was not very good at predicting the future, although he did try on occasion. One of his later pieces of journalism, from September 1912, was a report of a Unionist anti-Home Rule rally in Derry, addressed by Edward Carson. This was around the time that 100,000 people had signed the Solemn League and Covenant, vowing to fight the Home Rule Bill by any means. 'The Carson Circus in Derry' was the headline over a long, damning account of the meeting which, according to Art Flann, was badly organised, poorly attended, and suggested a movement on its last legs. The piece concludes with a description of Carson's departure afterwards, in almost poetic terms:

Then he passed down and took his seat in the train. He bore anything but a satisfied look, [wearing] an expression that, to my knowledge, was new to him. The lean, lantern jaws seemed less cadaverous, the deep-sunk dark eyes had a softer light, the brushed-back hair was not so fifth-rate actor-like. There was a settled sadness about his whole appearance that gave the idea of disgusted weariness. This impression was heightened by the cold loneliness of his departure. Not one of the committee who received him to see him off! It was a veritable flight into the night from the mockery of a triumph. And the last words ringing in his ear – perhaps, too, the most sincere, were those of a child [saying] 'Home Rule for Ireland.'¹⁴

As we know, this prediction of the demise of unionism was somewhat premature. The House of Lords delayed the Home Rule Bill for two years. Then the First World War broke out in Europe and delayed it forever. Ireland underwent a violent revolution instead and, a decade later, Strabane was an international frontier post.

¹³ See, for instance, Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

¹⁴ Art Flann, 'The Carson Circus in Derry,' *Donegal News* (28 September 1912): 5.

A Definite Line of Inquiry

In trawling through the work of Art Flann, alas, I did not find a smoking gun anywhere that would prove him to have been Michael Victor O'Nolan. There may be a yellowing paper trail somewhere in a newspaper office in Omagh or Strabane, or in personal archives, that makes the connection explicit. But for now, I can go no further than to say that O'Nolan would be on a very short list of candidates for the role of the pseudonymous columnist.

We know he was a literary man. So were many of the O'Nolans and Gormleys, as Breandán Ó Conaire has shown.¹⁵ It is family lore, Oisín Ó Nualláin (a grandson of Michael V.) informs me, that his grandfather had unpublished plays and the manuscript of a novel, all now presumed lost.¹⁶ It would hardly be surprising if he had been a newspaper columnist too. And if he was Art Flann, it would be an interesting literary coincidence at least, if not suggesting that Brian O'Nolan's novel-writing persona was a deliberate homage to his father. Maybe, rather than Flann O'Brien, it should have been Brian O'Flann.

But this process also set me wondering about the names 'Art' and 'Flann,' and why they might have been so appealing to the O'Nolans. They're both old and Gaelic: 'Art' was much used among the northern nobility, as in Art O'Neill, who died of exposure during the famous escape from Dublin Castle in 1592. There is now an extreme-athletic event named after that Art, retracing the original 60k route over the Wicklow mountains every New Year, from midnight until dawn. (I watched the start of the 2023 edition emerge from the Castle gates last January.) 'Flann' is not an especially northern name, although it was used by a few high kings and bards of ancient Ireland. But other than this mysterious columnist in Omagh and Strabane circa 1910, I had never seen the two used together.

Then, back at the University of Twitter on 26 June 2023, I acquired a mysterious new follower with the handle 'James Hogg.' In the best Flann O'Brien letter-writing tradition, the tweeter's name and avatar were both disguises. As readers may know, the original James Hogg was a self-educated Scottish peasant poet and essayist of the early 1800s. But the Twitter version, in a belated answer to Georgina Laragy's question – which I had meantime passed on to *Irish Times* readers¹⁷ – cited a reference in one

¹⁵ Breandán Ó Conaire, 'Brian Ó Nualláin/O'Nolan: Scholarly Background and Foreground,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 5–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.3226>. See also Brian Ó Conchubhair's forthcoming Irish-language biography, *An Saol Bocht*.

¹⁶ See Ó Nualláin, *Óige an dearthár*, 54–5.

¹⁷ Frank McNally, 'An Irishman's Diary,' *The Irish Times* (1 April 2023): 15.

of Eugene O'Growney's Irish text books.¹⁸ You'll remember that it was an O'Growney primer that Michael V. O'Nolan bought 75 copies of once for the Gaelic League in Strabane. The relevant passage in O'Growney's *Simple Lessons in Irish* runs as follows:

Many proper names involve the sound of *ái*; thus Art, Flann, give rise to the diminutives Artagán, Flannagán, (little Art, Flann), hence the family names O'h-Artagáin [...], O'Flannagáin [...], literally, grandson of little Art, Flann.¹⁹

I'm not sure if that's a smoking gun in establishing the true identity of the newspaper columnist Art Flann. But I think it does add substantially to the case that Michael V. O'Nolan, as another great policing cliché puts it, is a person of interest to the inquiry.

¹⁸ James Hogg (@Real_James_Hogg), 'Could this be the source of the pseudonym, Eugene O'Growney's Simple Lessons in Irish?', *Twitter* (26 June 2023): https://x.com/Real_James_Hogg/status/1673438422285922305?s=20 (last accessed 10 December 2023).

¹⁹ Eugene O'Growney, *Simple Lessons in Irish: Giving the Pronunciation of Each Word* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1897), 36.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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