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At Swim-Two-Books: In Search of the Second State of *At Swim-Two-Birds*

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This note looks into the existence of the so-called 'Second State' of the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and examines the historical and commercial circumstances that brought it into being.

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This note is an attempt to establish the circumstances surrounding the losses that publishers Longmans, Green & Co. (Ltd.) suffered as a result of the Second Great Fire of London in December 1940, and the influence of those circumstances on their issuance of a second state version of the first edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

After about a year of preliminary negotiations, on 13 March 1939 Longmans of Paternoster Row in London published Flann O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Longmans went to considerable efforts to promote it, but after three months it had only sold 244 copies.¹ Issue #3 of *First and Last: A Review with a Difference*, Longmans' free promotional publication, carried a laudatory piece about *At Swim-Two-Birds*.² This issue of *First and Last* had good circulation: 17,500 copies were printed in late 1938 especially for the National Book Fair, which ran from Friday 4 November until Monday 21 November at Earls Court in London. Other reviews of *At Swim-Two-Birds* appeared after publication in *Birmingham Daily Post*, *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, *The Bookseller*, *Bystander*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Dublin Leader*, *The Dublin Magazine*, *Irish Press*, *Irish Times*, *John O'London's Weekly*, *The Listener*, and undoubtedly elsewhere.³ Added to that, Longmans had arranged a 247-word eulogistic piece by Graham Greene for the rear panel of the book's dustjacket.⁴ Nonetheless, sales were poor. On 6 July 1939, nearly four months after publication, Patience Ross of A.M. Heath, O'Nolan's agents, wrote to inform him of the disappointing sales, which would have amounted to an average of about two copies a day, although most of the sales are likely to have been soon after publication, and to have diminished thereafter, indicating virtually no sales closer to the date of Ross's letter.⁵

And, as if to add insult to injury, on 1 September 1939 the Second World War started, which was to have a catastrophic effect on Longmans and on the British publishing trade in general. By December 1940 the German air force, as part of what became known as the Blitz, had struck right at the heart of Britain's capital city, London. On the night of 29 December 1940 they dropped 100,000 incendiary bombs on the metropolitan area, concentrating on the ancient heart of the city, the City of

¹ As documented in Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 6–57.

² *First and Last: A Review with a Difference* #3, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (Ltd.), November 1938. The publication is more correctly known as an 'external house organ.'

³ All these publications sourced via the British Newspaper Archive, from Longmans' *First and Last* #4 (May 1939), and from *Alive-Alive O! Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds*, ed. Rüdiger Imhof (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985).

⁴ See Pádraig Ó Méalóid, '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,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 1–14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.11656>.

⁵ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 57.

London, where the country's financial centre and business district was located. The bombs set fire to many buildings, including those on the streets surrounding St Paul's Cathedral, causing so much destruction that the event became known as the Second Great Fire of London.⁶ One of the streets affected was Paternoster Row, the heart of British publishing. And one of the publishers whose premises were destroyed was Longmans.

Longmans had already moved their offices and office staff to a new location near Wimbledon, but the premises on Paternoster Row was still being used as a warehouse for their books, according to Asa Briggs's *A History of Longmans and Their Books 1724–1990: Longevity in Publishing*.⁷ They also had a second warehouse across the river in Bermondsey. However, both premises were destroyed that night, with the destruction of an estimated three million books. On Saturday 28 December 1940, Longmans had been in a position to supply between five and six thousand titles: by the following Monday it was left with just twelve, which had been at their bookbinders, which itself would fall prey to a German bomb in April 1941.⁸

In January 1941, Longmans had a problem: their supply of bound books was reduced to nearly nothing, and reprinting those titles that would immediately find a market was going to be hampered by the ongoing paper rationing, which had been in place since late 1939. On 8 January 1941, Longmans' publisher Noël Brack wrote to their New York agent, Walter Jefferay:

Although we had endeavoured to spread our stocks by getting printers to hold small quantities of sheet stock,⁹ nearly the whole of our bound books, and a very large proportion of quires¹⁰ were destroyed, for our other big London warehouse was also burnt out that night.¹¹

⁶ Great Britain Ministry of Information and Great Britain Ministry of Home Security, *Front Line 1940–1941: The Official Story of the Civil Defence of Britain* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1942), 10 et seq.

⁷ Asa Briggs, *A History of Longmans and Their Books 1724–1990: Longevity in Publishing* (New Castle, Delaware & London: Oak Knoll Press and the British Library, 2008), 400.

⁸ Briggs, *A History of Longmans*, 401.

⁹ Sheet stock is defined by *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology* (Washington: Matt T. Roberts and Don Etherington, Library of Congress, 1981) as 'Unbound printed sheets of a publication which are inventoried by the printer until receipt of a binding order from the publisher.' Accessed online at <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/don/dt/dt3077.html>.

¹⁰ A quire is defined by *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books* as 'A gathering (section), particularly when unfolded (i.e., printed but unfolded). A quire was originally a gathering of 4 sheets, forming 8 leaves or 16 pages after one folding.' Accessed online at <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/don/dt/dt2766.html>.

¹¹ Briggs, *A History of Longmans*, 402.

Where, amongst all this, was *At Swim-Two-Birds* to be found? It seems probable that whatever bound stock there was of the novel had been destroyed along with the rest of Longmans' stock in their warehouses. But there must have been unbound sheet stock held at the printers – Western Printing Services Ltd of Bristol – or possibly amongst the quantity of quires that were *not* destroyed that night. Certainly it is generally accepted in the antiquarian book trade that amongst those printed pages were sheet stock of *At Swim*. As the Old New York Book Shop puts it, on an online listing for a copy of *At Swim*: 'The publisher's London warehouse was bombed by the Germans in 1940, and most of the unsold copies were destroyed. An unknown number of unbound sheets of the first printing that survived the bombing were bound up by Longmans in the second issue gray cloth binding.'¹²

In 1941 the total number of books published in the UK fell from 14,913 in 1939 to 10,732 in 1940 and to 5,092 in 1941.¹³ In this thinned-out marketplace, previously under-performing titles such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* would have had a better chance: there were fewer titles available even as, in general, more people were reading more books, due to restrictions on other types of recreation during wartime.¹⁴ Still, Longmans chose not to reissue *At Swim-Two-Birds* at its original price of 10/6.¹⁵ Instead, they decided to invoke one of the clauses in the contract between them and the author, and sell it at a reduced price.

Brian O'Nolan – the name under which the contract for *At Swim-Two-Birds* was issued – signed his contract with Longmans on 21 October 1938, and the book was published by them on 13 March 1939.¹⁶ The contract contains this clause:

2. (b) On Cheap Editions: Should a cheap edition be issued hereafter which shall not be done within two (2) years from the first publication without the consent of the Author, the royalty on such edition shall be calculated at the rate of Ten (10%) per cent. of the English published price on all copies sold of that edition whether in Great Britain or elsewhere.

Issuing a cheap edition appears to be exactly what they did. In the Publications of the Week section of *The Bookseller* for 17 July 1941 the following item is listed:

¹² Biblio, Inc. listing for First Edition, Second Issue of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. <https://biblio.co.uk/book/swim-two-birds-obrien-flann/d/1547964994>.

¹³ *The English Catalogue of Books for 1939*, ed. James D. Stewart (London: The Publishers' Circular Limited, 1940); *The English Catalogue of Books for 1941*, ed. James D. Stewart (London: The Publishers' Circular Limited, 1942).

¹⁴ *The English Catalogue of Books for 1939*, unnumbered page in front matter.

¹⁵ Ten shillings and six pence in pre-decimal currency, the equivalent of fifty-two and a half pence in decimal currency.

¹⁶ The contract for *At Swim-Two-Birds* is contained within the Flann O'Brien Collection in the John J. Burns Library at Boston College.

At Swim Two Birds (O'Brien) C8.316.n.e. 3/6 Longmans Fic

This listing indicates the title, the author's surname, the size (Crown Octavo – about 7½ × 5 inches), the number of pages (316), an indication that this is a new edition (n.e.), the price (3/6), the publisher (Longmans), and the category (fiction). Most of the specifications match those listed for the title in *The English Catalogue of Books for 1939*. Most, but not all. The price had been changed, nor was this the only change to the physicality of the book. But this was not a new edition, nor was it even a new impression, as I will explain below. However, it would seem that listing it as a new edition was the closest *The Bookseller* could get to indicating that there was a change.

Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology defines an edition as:

All of the copies of a work printed from the same type or plates, either issued at one time or at intervals. In the latter case, the edition may consist of a number of impressions. A statement of the edition of a book is often printed on the title page or its verso, along with the particulars of any previous editions on the verso.¹⁷

It further defines a first edition as:

The entire number of copies of a book or other publication printed from the same setting of type. The books may be printed at any time. A new edition does not come into being until there have been substantial changes in the type, i.e., a corrected edition, additions to the text (which is a revised edition), or until the type has been reset, which would be a new edition, 2nd edition, etc.¹⁸

And it defines an impression as:

All copies of a work printed at one time from one setting of type. There may be several impressions (presumably unaltered) of one edition, each new printing from standing type or original plates constituting a new 'impression' of the work.¹⁹

¹⁷ 'edition', *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*, accessed online at <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/don/dt/dt1154.html>.

¹⁸ 'first edition', *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*, accessed online at <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/don/dt/dt1332.html>.

¹⁹ 'impression', *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*, accessed online at <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/don/dt/dt1820.html>.

By these definitions, Longmans only produced one edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and one impression of that edition, and never reprinted it thereafter. I own a copy of the 'second state' first edition, and I can confirm that, aside from the publisher's and printer's names and addresses, the only other information on the copyright page is a line in the middle of the page that simply states 'First published 1939.' Nonetheless, there are two separate states of that first and only edition and impression of that book. The differences occur in the paratext – all those parts of a book that aren't the author's text. In the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, this meant one small change to the dustjacket, changing the price on the bottom right-hand corner of the inside front flap to 3/6 – a third of the previous price of 10/6 – and changing the colour of the buckram cloth covering of the protective boards from black with gold lettering to a grey-green cloth with black lettering. The grey-green version is now referred to in the book trade as the 'second state' or, more precisely, first edition, first impression, second state, even though the core of the book, the text block, right down to the information printed on the copyright page, is exactly the same, having been printed at the same time, and from the same printing plates, as the so-called 'first state' copies, with the black cloth covers.

It is also worth noting here that there does not appear to have been any correspondence between the publishers and O'Nolan with regard to this reduction in price. At that time, whilst scrambling to bring their stock levels back up after the fire, one can perhaps understand that Longmans felt there was no need, as their contract stated that they didn't need to. As shown above, the contract stipulated that 'Should a cheap edition be issued hereafter which shall not be done within two (2) years from the first publication without the consent of the Author,' which seems to indicate that as long as two years had passed they could issue a cheap edition without needing to get O'Nolan's consent. *At Swim-Two-Birds* was originally published by Longmans on 13 March 1939, and this new cheap version was recorded in the 17 July 1941 edition of *The Bookseller*, technically putting them in the clear. Perhaps they should have informed the author regardless, but these were difficult times...

A recent listing²⁰ for a copy of the first state of *At Swim-Two-Birds* (the one with the black cloth covering) on the website of Ulysses Rare Books in Dublin states:

Most of the bound stock (first issues) was destroyed when Longmans' premises were bombed in 1940 and when only a small number had been distributed. One source states that only 82 copies came to Dublin, the centre from which one might reasonably expect the heaviest sales, and most of these would have been destined for the

²⁰ April 2024, to be precise. Yours for only €2,950!

general fiction sections of libraries. Sheet stock however remained at the printers and this was bound up in grey-green cloth and reissued in 1941 or 1942 (known as the second issue) at a new price of 3/6 (much reduced due to poor sales of the first issue).²¹

After I addressed a query to them as to the source of this information, they replied:

This assumption has been doing the rounds for quite a few years now, and it seems to have originated from the publishers' archives, unfortunately I cannot be more precise.²²

Longmans' archives are held in Reading University in England. The archive consists of 1,100 boxes and 300 books, so trying to find the details for one underperforming book, by an author they never published again, amidst all those files, with the added peril that the paperwork might not even exist anymore, sounds very much like a case of looking for a very small needle in a very large haystack. And, in the end, it may be that any further information unearthed may only be of any real interest to collectors and dealers in antiquarian books as, if you removed the dustjackets and tore away the covers of a first edition of *At Swim*, of either state, there would be no discernible difference of any kind. That acknowledged, this note and the research that produced it offer insights into the misfortunes of O'Nolan and his first novel, help illuminate the perils of publishing, and show how Longmans – and no doubt other publishers of the time – did their best to deal with the circumstances they found themselves in. Research, as ever, is ongoing...

²¹ 'At Swim Two Birds. First Edition, First Issue (1939)', Ulysses Rare Books, <https://www.rarebooks.ie/books/literature/at-swim-two-birds-first-edition-first-issue-1939-3/>.

²² Private email with David Cunningham of Ulysses Rare Books, 9 April 2024.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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