

Introduction

Flann O'Brien & the Archive

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Brian O'Nolan is a uniquely archival writer. He is archival both in how he writes and what he writes about. As Myles na gCopaleen, he took *The Irish Times* as his hunting ground, sniffing through the articles and advertisements for easy prey. In his novels, the characters yearn for archival status, for the eternal safe envelopment of their words or thoughts within an institution which validates them as worthy of safekeeping. The nameless narrator from *The Third Policeman* devotes his life (and his afterlife) to the construction of a de Selby codex. *An Béal Bocht* presents itself as a desperate and desperately funny catalogue of a dying race whose likes will never be here again. O'Nolan even penned a novel he called *The Dalkey Archive*, though how exactly this novel is an archive and what it keeps safe for future generations is a matter of some debate. So, it seems reasonable that archives should be the focus of this second issue of *The Parish Review*. The articles in this issue encourage us not only to consult the manuscripts, papers, and books which are available in the archives, they also encourage us to reconsider what an archive is and how the archival experience can shape our understanding of Brian O'Nolan.

The real archives are mostly in America now, divided and sold to the highest bidder to bring some financial security to O'Nolan's surviving family. This is more than fitting, especially for an author who assumed and fulfilled the duties of a breadwinner for a family of 12 at the age of 26. No artist's garret and art for art's sake for Flann. He was a working man with a working writer's sense of output and income. This is the focus of Amy Nejezschleb's article, 'The Myles Brand Franchise.' Nejezschleb completed her PhD work at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and it's here that many of O'Nolan's papers are kept. Letters, receipts, unfinished work, notes, scripts, and discoveries big and small all filed neatly away and waiting. Nejezschleb argues that, in his later years, Myles na Gopaleen became aware of the marketability of his name. She provides archival evidence which points to his desire to create a brand which he could rely on for much-needed income as he grew older.

What might be considered to be the largest O'Nolan archive can be found in the Burns Library collection at Boston College. This archive holds papers, letters, and books, but the focus is also on the artefacts of this manifold writer's life. Boston College has showpieces such as the Underwood typewriter on which Flann O'Brien's novels and Myles na gCopaleen's columns were written. There is Myles's famous wide-brimmed black hat and his coat. There is Brian O'Nolan's violin and his passport. Marion Quirici has worked extensively in these archives as a former student at Boston College. She is now working on her PhD at the University at Buffalo. Quirici argues convincingly in her article 'Brian O'Nolan in the Archive: Assembling Myles and Flann' that there are archives and unconsulted writings at the University at Buffalo that are waiting to be discovered. She encourages us all to find what might be undiscovered material in our own university libraries and to reclaim this for the future of O'Nolan studies.

Archives can extend beyond collections in libraries to include work that exists undiscovered and unconsulted, perhaps even unread since first published. For this, we have Jack Fennell's explanation of how his knowledge of the Irish language brought him to new discoveries about O'Nolan's interest in science fiction in his earliest writings in the Irish language. Fennell recently earned his PhD at the University of Limerick, and his article 'Lost in Flannslation: Reading and Translating the Early Work of Brian Ó Nualláin' provides a thorough consideration of the difficulties facing those who would venture into translating the famously particular Brian O'Nolan's words from Irish to English.

Sometimes works which are put away and rarely ever consulted again are put away with good purpose, as is often held to be the case with O'Nolan's submitted-failed-and resubmitted master's thesis for University College Dublin. But Adrian Naughton has focused on this work, translating the thesis and exploring in his article, "'More of your fancy kiss-my-hand": A Further Note on Flann O'Brien's *Nádúir-fhíliocht na Gaedhilge*,' how O'Nolan's discussion of poetry relates to theories of the great modernists Eliot and Pound.

Myles na gCopaleen was Brian O'Nolan's Irish-language persona, and it can be strange to reconsider this figure as an influenced reader, as a consumer of words rather than a fearless, bombastic authority on all matters. Considering these works makes us rethink how we read and understand Myles, Flann, or any other incarnation in which Brian O'Nolan would choose to manifest himself. This experience of fuller understanding is the focus of Maebh Long's article 'Twenty-three Archival Aphorisms.' This article questions, quite literally, what an archive is and how spending time poring over the documents can bring one to a fuller understanding of the complexity of one author's written life.

Those who visit the various archives in Carbondale, Boston, or the Harry Ransom Center in Texas, often do so with a dual purpose. The first is to access O'Nolan materials that are not otherwise available. There is the original manuscript of *At Swim-Two-Birds* with the author's hand-written corrections, there are letters between O'Nolan and hugely influential friends such as Niall Sheridan, and there is O'Nolan's library of books. When we go to the archives, we can see things such as this, and the information contained in these items is not available in any book which can be purchased or loaned. To understand more about O'Nolan's writing processes, his personal interactions, or his reading processes, we have no choice but to go to these archives.

But for many who study O'Nolan, there is also a second purpose in visiting these archives, and that is to have personal contact with O'Nolan relics, holy or otherwise. Seeing his typewriter or his hat isn't going to illuminate his texts or offer any nuanced insight into his themes, but the experience enables a personal connection with a writer who, unlike so many of the great Irish writers of the twentieth century, has yet to become a figure of popular culture. Many who read O'Nolan feel as though they are the first to discover him. To not simply read the documents, but to be able to touch these papers and artefacts enables a special and significant connection. These moments of personal connection are valuable, they can make more real the feeling that the author is somehow ours alone, even as we work to make his work known to others.

This feeling of discovery can come from more than just the interaction with the stuff of O'Nolan's archives, it can also come in seeing the familiar in new and unexpected ways. Those who attended the *100 Myles* conference in Vienna in 2011 might have had the wonderful opportunity to attend the hilarious two-man show *The Brother*, directed by Andrew Sherlock and performed by Gerry Smyth and David Llewellyn. Seeing the columns brought to the stage somehow makes the pace even more breathless and the situations even funnier. But bringing the *Cruiskeen Lawn* newspaper columns to the stage requires considerable planning and thought, and Sherlock proves that he knows what Myles knew all along: it takes a lot of effort to seem so effortless.

Beyond the stage, O'Nolan has recently been adapted to the graphic novel in Cló Mhaigh Eo's edition of *An Béal Bocht*, which was released in December 2012. Artist John McCloskey and editor Breandán Ó Conaire answer questions about the difficulties and choices they had to make in order to create a visual, visceral representation of this funny and troubling work. Its likes have not been seen before.

We are now in the process of creating our own archive, an archive of criticism on Brian O'Nolan's work. This International Flann O'Brien Society is still in its very early days, but with one successful conference under its belt and another planned for

Rome this summer, it's clear that there is exciting work being done now and even more exciting work to come. But if you'll indulge me for a moment, I would like to make the appeal that we carefully consider how we can make this society into a foundation that supports, inspires, and challenges its members in a meaningful and sustained way. We ought not to adopt unthinkingly the models of other societies, but should instead amalgamate what appeals and inspires, as Myles would do. That inspiration one feels from an archive or after a conference should be able to sustain itself somehow, especially in this era of Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and online meetings. O'Nolan is an author who transcended genres and languages and broke boundaries. Should not we react to this by forming a society that does the same? What is possible? What can we do? What would you like to see? Now is the time to make yourself heard, to explain and explore and help to create this society in a conscious, considered way which engages with the challenges set forth by O'Nolan. Contact the International Flann O'Brien Society via their Facebook page or contact the founders Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan directly via the Society website (<http://www.univie.ac.at/flannobrien2011>). Send them e-mails. Send them letters. Call them at home in the evenings. Try them at their parents' house on Sundays around suppertime. Make yourself heard.

One of my favourite articles about Brian O'Nolan is the piece for *The Irish Times* written by Brendan Behan called 'Secret Scripture.' Behan concludes the piece with a section entitled 'Catechism'

Q. Who is Flann O'Brien?

A. Brian Nolan.

Q. Who is Brian Nolan?

A. Myles na Gopaleen.

Q. What did these three men do?

A. They wrote three books called *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Q. What are Flann O'Brien?

A. They are a credit to their country.¹

This question 'What are Flann O'Brien?' is not one to be taken lightly. In his letters, books, manuscripts, and scripts, we can discover what Flann O'Brien was and what he is even still. I would argue that we should also consider, in these new and exciting stages of the International Flann O'Brien Society, the fundamental question: how are Flanneurs?

Notes & references

¹ Brendan Behan, 'Secret Scripture,' *The Irish Times* (30 July 1960): 6.