

Brian O’Nolan in the Archive

Assembling Myles & Flann

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For Myles na gCopaleen, the archive was one more punchline. In an editorial titled ‘Chequemate,’ he complains that the names of modern corporations have grown far too long, making the business of writing a cheque an affront to good penmanship. ‘Why should a commercial title consist of a string of surnames?’ he presses, ‘The customer who receives a bill from such a firm has no interest in its family archives.’¹ ‘Archives’ here are textual baggage, counter to efficiency and serving no purpose other than pride. Twenty years earlier, when Myles affected to use archival evidence to prove a point, the parenthetical subtext reads, ‘(Produces filthy wad of parchments).’² The ‘filthy wad of parchments’ model of the archive would corroborate the common representation of archives as collections of unpublished and manuscript material; in this case, useful only to the arrogantly erudite.

But if Myles used the archive to personify the fustiness and dustiness of the literary critic, this was also a role he was happy to assume himself. By 1963, he had accumulated quite an archive of his own, consisting mostly of published newspaper contributions. If the assortment of oversized ledgers, diaries, and albums of cuttings now housed at the Burns Library, Boston College is anything to go by, O’Nolan himself rather painstakingly attended to his archive during his lifetime.³ Ranting against misprints and the misspellings of foreign idioms in the very paper for which he wrote, *The Irish Times*, Myles writes, ‘To assist the intellectuals who must traffic in alien clichés, I again go back twenty years in my archives and present some more catechistical instruction.’⁴

Whether old and mouldy ‘wads of parchment’ or back catalogues of published materials, archives in Myles’s writings are worthy of being disturbed. He depicts himself rustling up these old documents in the interest of new knowledge—or perhaps, to reiterate points he has already made but which have not, apparently, gotten through. That Myles illustrates the archive *in use*, counteracts any model of the archive as a graveyard, as the final resting ground of documents whose lives are spent. We are all familiar with Flann O’Brien’s metaphor of texts as living things, the children of the author-father who created them, demonstrated most famously by Dermot Trellis’s progeny of John Furriskey in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. If the creative process of

writing is analogous to the birth of a literary text, and its life takes place through the processes of publication and reception, then the archive is more akin to an afterlife than it is to death and decay. The archive is not a place one visits simply to pay homage to writings dead and gone, but to resurrect those writings and place them into new contexts and circulation. In this essay, I explore the potential for an active archival afterlife for the writings of Brian O'Nolan.

Insofar as archives are understood to be unpublished and manuscript material—or if you prefer Myles's designation, 'filthy wads of parchment'—, O'Nolan's major archives are in three locations: the John J. Burns Library at Boston College, the Special Collections Research Center in the Morris Library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. However, as the International Flann O'Brien Society (IFOBS) Bibliography illustrates, our man published prolifically throughout his life in newspapers, weeklies, and little magazines, and these materials can be located elsewhere than the three collections listed above. At The Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, where this researcher is working toward her PhD, one can find much more than Joyce's association copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, inscribed by the author. The Collection also holds issues of *The Bell*, *Envoy*, *Irish Writing*, *Story*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Kavanagh's Weekly*, *Threshold*, and *Lace Curtain*—venues of the wider corpus of Flann, Brian, and Myles. The finding aid I put together for an O'Nolan Archive at The Poetry Collection was surprisingly substantial,⁵ but still incredibly abbreviated when you examine the IFOBS Bibliography and consider how much this man wrote on a yearly—nay, daily—basis. Previously published materials such as I found at The Poetry Collection have enjoyed little to no 'afterlife' on the scene of O'Nolan scholarship. These publications included occasional articles demonstrating O'Nolan's critical capacity, translations of old Irish poetry revealing his literary taste, and short stories that have not currently been anthologised or much discussed. Using my own modest findings as an example of the work that can be done even with partial archival holdings, I encourage other scholars of O'Nolan across the map to see what they can make of what's nearby.

Trends in O'Nolan criticism are largely a function of what is available. That the local publications of Brian O'Nolan have received little critical attention relative to the novels is an incarnation of the bibliocentric bias in O'Nolan scholarship. Carol Taaffe points out that O'Nolan's novels of the 1960s, widely agreed upon as examples of a novelist in decline, still receive more academic consideration than his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns.⁶ The reasons for this are twofold. First, by virtue of their form: books are widely available and easy to access. Newspaper columns are comparatively difficult to compile and arrange in a manner suitable to reading, and if one wishes to preserve

their appropriate context as part of the material medium of the newspaper, the project is even more overwhelming. Digital archives currently available are often degraded, rendering certain pages illegible. This researcher tried and failed to procure Flann O'Brien's first letter in the 1939 *Irish Times* Letters Controversy, its original having been simply cut out of the page that ProQuest Historical Newspapers photocopied for the online archive.⁷ ProQuest's own copy derives from a 1970s microfilm version housed in many research centres, including the National Library of Ireland. The ubiquity of this technology means that regardless of location, scholars in various libraries where *The Irish Times* is available will encounter similar problems with the material: they will be reading the same vandalised copy.

The second, and more detrimental, motivation for the bibliocentric bias is the belief that O'Nolan's journalism somehow contributed to his decline as a novelist. Shortly after his death, Bernard Benstock complained in *Éire-Ireland* about the 'twenty-year suppression of the talented Flann by the irrepressible Myles.'⁸ Hugh Kenner dismissed the four million words of *Cruiskeen Lawn* thusly: 'Was it the drink was his ruin or was it the column? For ruin is the word.'⁹

Current O'Nolan scholarship, of course, is seeking to remedy that belief.

But I want to argue that *Cruiskeen Lawn* is not the only effort that has been buried by the bibliocentric bias. The ephemeral publications of Brian, Flann, and Myles give us a more thorough picture of our man—who he is when he's at home—than we get from the novels and the journalism alone. The ambiguous space of *someone else's journal* separates O'Nolan from his habitual personae, and as a guest contributor he is neither entirely Myles na gCopaleen nor entirely Flann O'Brien, George Knowall, Count O'Blather, Brother Barnabas, Brian Ó Nualláin, Oscar Love, John James Doe, or anyone else. The writer who emerges from the pages of these forgotten journals is a man who is genuinely invested in the literary commerce of his locality.

The little magazines featuring contributions from O'Nolan showcase his capacity for critical literary review. In *Irish Writing*, a Cork journal that ran from 1946–1957, I found evidence that O'Nolan himself was aware of what I have termed the bibliocentric bias and that he had an answer for it. Writing as Myles na gCopaleen in a 1950 review of Patrick Campbell's *A Long Drink of Cold Water*, he asserts, 'It is a most diverting collection, brilliant and biting in parts and a great credit to Mr Campbell, who proves that addiction to journalism, dreadest of drugs, need not necessarily atrophy a bright and genuine literary talent.'¹⁰ Myles could have been addressing his own future detractors.

Not only was Myles a literary critic himself, but he also participated in the critique of literary criticism. Also in *Irish Writing*, he published a review of L.A.G. Strong's *The Sacred River: An Approach to James Joyce*.¹¹ Though O'Nolan's complicated

position within the shadow of Joyce has been for decades a popular topic in the criticism, I have not seen or heard reference to this review.

Irish Writing also houses some of O'Nolan's neglected short fiction: 'Drink and Time in Dublin' (1946)¹² and 'Donabate' (1952).¹³ These short stories, centring on the culture of drink and storytelling in Dublin, could be classified as a new hybrid genre in between fiction and cultural criticism. O'Nolan's cultural criticism, best exemplified by the descriptive vignettes on pubs, dancehalls, and dog races that he contributed to *The Bell*, offers an unflinching gaze into the customs of mid-century Ireland without passing judgment. In terms of style, the stories contributed to *Irish Writing* take the form of dialogue unmediated by a narrator, much like 'The Brother' columns. Taken together with the articles in *The Bell*, an O'Nolan cultural criticism emerges, demanding further attention.

The space of the local literary magazine provided Irish writers (at least, the ones who stayed at home) with a forum for discussion and for the dialogic development of philosophies of writing. O'Nolan was at times jocularly combative, at other times scornful, of his contemporaries at home. He developed a taste for debates in unexpected venues in the *Irish Times* Letters Controversies of 1939 and 1940. Although the Controversies are typically read as an irreverent flurry of witticisms, they circled around something more serious: the role and purpose of the Irish artist or writer. Close reading of O'Nolan's critical contributions to the now marginal collaborative publications of his day reveals that the Controversies were not actually resolved in the pages of *The Irish Times*, but that they continued for over a decade, growing in sophistication and traversing several venues of publication. From Myles's unfavourable depictions of Seán O'Faoláin in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to his points of divergence from Patrick Kavanagh in *Envoy*, we can trace the development of a substantial cultural theory. While Myles's cultural theories are a topic for another essay, a glimpse of his characteristic stance can be gleaned from the third issue of *Kavanagh's Weekly*, where Myles was comfortable enough to speak his mind:

What do you think, I think of *Kavanagh's Weekly*?

It's not bad at all. It must change, of course. The cloying iterance about the function of the artist in society will have to stop. Your shirt-maker or motor assembler asserts his existence by the formation of some sort of plant, however back the back-lane of its location. Your artist of to-day proclaims his arrival by documents attested by his personal sign-manual.¹⁴

Myles's vituperation of the overly self-important artist may be surprising, knowing, as we do, the pretence of an inflated ego and the tendency toward self-proclamation

that Myles himself so frequently adopts in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Perhaps his parody has a more specific target than we habitually recognise. Reading Myles in a multiplicity of venues can complicate our reading of his persona in its more familiar context of the newspaper.

The final argument I will make in encouragement of archival Brian O'Nolan research is perhaps less pragmatic, but still, I think, valid: the joy of the task itself. Because archives are by nature scattered and incomplete, the work of the archivist is akin to a treasure hunt. The delight attending the experience of *finding something*, especially when you did not quite know what you were looking for, is somehow intensified when it occurs in the material atmosphere of the archive. The aesthetic appeal of such moments can be compared to the 'aura' that Benjamin laments has been lost in the age of mechanical reproduction. My own most memorable 'Eureka!' moment is underscored with irony, because the something I 'discovered' was not something new.

The Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo lists *Poetry Ireland* numbers one through thirty-one amongst its holdings. From the IFOBS Bibliography, I knew that Myles had published something called 'The Tired Scribe: A Poem from the Irish' in the journal's fourth issue in January of 1949. Procuring this publication was less simple than with other journals, because it is only available in microfiche. To my shame, I had at this time never actually used microfiche without the direct assistance of a librarian. Even at that, it had been a while. So, the curator, Jim Maynard, introduced me to 'The Beast,' which looked like an old refrigerator and made twice as much noise. Scanning through the slides took quite a long time. For someone accustomed to using the 'Command F' function on her Mac, actually having to pore over tiny page after tiny page of the journal while turning the little knobs at just the right speed was disconcerting. But then, when I lit on the object of my search, it was all the more exciting. Myles had found, and carefully translated, an old Irish poem that, in both form and content, resonates with his own interest in the writing act and the materials of transmission:

My hand has a pain from writing,
Not steady the sharp tool of my craft
Its slender beak spews bright ink—
A beetle-dark shining draught.

Streams of the wisdom of white God
From my fair-brown, fine hand sally,
On the page they splash their flood

In ink of the green-skinned holly.

My little dribbly pen stretches
Across the great white paper plain,
Insatiable for splendid riches—
That is why my hand has a pain!¹⁵

Here we see a self-reflexivity that would not be out of place in what we call the postmodern. The poem describes writing as an embodied activity, the hand itself sacrificing its comfort for some notion of the eternal wisdom of the words. If the scribe here is an instrument of a superior creative being, he is not a passive receptacle. Rather, he turns the experience of transcription into an occasion for his own creativity—writing about writing.

Being interested in Myles's relationship to text, mediation, and meta-writing, I couldn't wait to transcribe the poem myself. It was only after doing so that I found out 'The Tired Scribe' had appeared in *Cruiskeen Lawn* two years before being reproduced in *Poetry Ireland*. In August of 1947, Myles had sung the poem's praises while pretending he himself was the author of the original Irish version as well as its translator into modern English.¹⁶ Moreover, the compilers of the 1976 *Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn* had selected the poem to serve as an epigraph for the collection.¹⁷ In short, my recognition of the symbolic potential of 'The Tired Scribe' for the Myles canon was not mine alone. Was I disappointed? Why are we, as researchers, compelled to 'get there first'? Ultimately, that my discovery of 'The Tired Scribe' was not a discovery of something that had gone unnoticed does not cheapen my recollection of the experience. Because of the steps I had to take to observe it, and because of the act of transcribing the poem by hand, with a pencil, into a notebook, the find is still a treasure in my own archive. The process of assembly makes the task of the researcher worthwhile.

This article has been an invitation to O'Nolan scholars to attend to the broader corpus of our man. Assemble archives of your own using the IFOBS Bibliography and whatever libraries or collections are available to you. There are, of course, challenges to the O'Nolan archivist that are unique to his body of work. Firstly, few writers to date can match him for the amount and assortment of pseudonyms under which he wrote. This is not merely a problem of organisation. Certainly, it makes locating his publications difficult when you are unsure of which pseudonyms to search for, and indeed, how to spell them — even his personal and professional designations are unstable in that regard. But the fact of pseudonyms means we do not even know the boundaries of our man's canon. Did he, in fact, borrow the identity of the

correspondent Oscar Love for the purposes of stirring the pot during the Letters Controversies? Did he really write some of the *Sexton Blake* novels? Should contributions to *Cruiskeen Lawn* authored by Niall Montgomery under the name of Myles na gCopaleen be included in the Brian O'Nolan canon? Perhaps it is best that these mysteries remain open for interrogation. Myles/Oscar/Stephen Blakesley derives his strange power from the posing of such unanswerable questions about authorship.

Secondly, we face the challenges of material degradation. I described earlier the difficulties I had in finding any copy of a letter to the editor O'Nolan had written as Flann O'Brien. Many of the digital archives of *The Irish Times* for this period are bleached, faded, or darkened to such an extent that reading or searching them is not possible. To anthologise newspaper articles in books is one solution to this, but as was discussed at the 100 Myles conference in Vienna, material context is of supreme importance for Myles.¹⁸ Without the surrounding headlines, advertisements, and editorials of the newspaper, the experience of reading the column itself is degraded. The same goes for his ephemeral publications: book reviews, cultural commentary, short stories, poetry translations, and so on. To take, say, Myles's statements about *Kavanagh's Weekly* outside the context of that venue is to alter its effect.

Finally, it is a challenge for most of us to negotiate the language barrier. Beyond the obvious difficulty of making O'Nolan's Irish writings available to non-Irish speakers, there are the problems posed by the hybridity of all O'Nolan's languages. His English is not *English* English; his Irish is not school Irish and not always modern Irish, either. His interlinguistic puns playing on French, Latin, and German idioms evade translation—sometimes their humour depends upon this evasion. So how is one to classify such writing?

Unsurprisingly, what the O'Nolan archivist finds is that this writer seems to have been intent on obfuscating the processes of classification upon which archival work depends. Compiling a canon that challenges facile categories of authorship, medium, and language, O'Nolan upends the completist compulsions of the archivist. Even genre boundaries are confounded: the IFOBS Bibliography, for instance, lists 'The Tired Scribe' as well as 'Drink and Time in Dublin' under the category of 'Occasional Articles,' although the former is a poem translation and the latter is closer to short fiction. Myles may have smirked at our inability to catalogue him according to traditional methods and arrangements. But I insist that the specific challenges of building an O'Nolan archive are what lend the activity its excitement. We cannot appreciate the value of such difficulties until we play along and allow ourselves the pleasure of the chase.

APPENDIX:

Toward an archive for Brian O'Nolan in The Poetry Collection, University at Buffalo: a finding aid in progress. (Probably partial)

Manuscripts (Maybe)

Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939). [James Joyce Collection. Inscribed by the author to James Joyce.]

Journals & Little Magazines: Short Stories, Occasional Articles, Reviews & Criticism, Poetry & Translations

STORY (1931–2000)

Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' *Story* 19, no. 90 (July–August 1941): 65–68. [Libraries Annex].

THE BELL (1940–1954)

Flann O'Brien, 'The Dance Halls,' *The Bell* 1, no. 5 (February 1941): 44–52. In Sean McMahan, ed. *The Best of The Bell: Great Irish Writing* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1978), 36–43.

IRISH WRITING (1946–1957)

Myles na gCopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' *Irish Writing* 1 (1946): 71–77.
—, 'Joyce Re-approached.' Review of L. A. G. Strong, *The Sacred River: An Approach to James Joyce*. *Irish Writing* 10 (January 1950): 71–72.
—, 'A Glass of Punch,' review of Patrick Campbell, *A Long Drink of Cold Water*, *Irish Writing* 11 (May 1950): 73.
—, 'Donabate,' *Irish Writing* 20–21 (November 1952): 41–42.

POETRY IRELAND (1948–1956, 1962–)

Myles na gCopaleen, 'The Tired Scribe: A Poem from the Irish,' *Poetry Ireland* 4 (January 1949): 12. [Microfiche, slide 2.]

ENVOY (1949–1951)

Brian Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' *Envoy* 1, no. 3 (February 1950): 57–62.
—, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' *Envoy* 5, no. 17 (April 1951): 5–11. [James Joyce Criticism].
Myles na gCopaleen, 'Baudelaire and Kavanagh,' *Envoy* 3, no. 12 (November 1950): 78–81. [A 'counter-diary' to Patrick Kavanagh's *Envoy* Diary].
—, 'Book Reviews,' *Envoy* 3, no. 12 (November 1950): 88–89.

—, 'Book Reviews,' *Envoy* 4, no. 15 (February 1951): 76–77.

KAVANAGH'S WEEKLY (1952) [Poetry Periodical Collection: Mapcase Oversize]

Myles na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1, no. 3 (26 April 1952): 3–4.

—, 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1, no. 4 (3 May 1952): 4.

—, 'How Are You Off For Tostals?,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1, no. 5 (10 May 1952): 4.

—, 'Motor Economics,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1, no. 7 (24 May 1952): 6.

THRESHOLD (1957–) [Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast].

Brian O'Nolan, 'After Hours,' *Threshold* 21 (Summer 1967): 15–18.

LACE CURTAIN (1969–1978)

Myles na Gopaleen, 'Three Poems from the Irish,' *Lace Curtain* 4 (Summer 1971): 15–18.

Contemporary Reviews & Criticism of Myles

THE BELL (1940–1954)

Richard Watts, 'Guest Critic: A Review of Myles na gCopaleen's *Faustus Kelly*,' *The Bell* 5, no. 6 (March 1943): 482–487.

Thomas Hogan, 'Myles na gCopaleen,' *The Bell* 13, no. 2 (November 1946): 129–140.

Volumes of the Journalism

Flann O'Brien, *The Various Lives of Keats and Chapman* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976).

—, *Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976).

—, *The Hair of the Dogma* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1977).

—, *Flann O'Brien At War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940–1945*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999).

Editions of the Novels, Stories, & Plays

Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (New York: Pantheon, 1939). [Robert Duncan Collection].

—, *The Hard Life* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1961).

—, *The Third Policeman* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1967).

—, *The Poor Mouth* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973).

—, *Stories and Plays* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973).

—, *The Dalkey Archive* (New York: Penguin, 1977). [John Logan Collection].

—, *A Flann O'Brien Reader*, ed. Stephen Jones (New York: Viking Press, 1978).

Biography

Timothy O'Keefe, ed. *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1973). [John Montague Collection].

Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1976).

Critical Scholarship

Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1975).

Carol Taaffe, Carol. *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008).

Notes & references

¹ Myles na Gopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, 'Chequemate,' *The Irish Times* (1 January 1965): 10.

² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (5 October 1944): 3.

³ The finding aid for the Flann O'Brien Collection at the John J. Burns Library at Boston College lists two albums, three ledgers, three diaries, and one foolscap under series 9, 'Cruiskeen Lawn 1940–1966.' These bound cuttings were likely put together by O'Nolan himself and his wife Evelyn.

⁴ Myles na Gopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (11 March 1963): 8.

⁵ See Appendix.

⁶ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 205.

⁷ 'Letters to the Editor,' *The Irish Times* (11 January 1939): 5.

⁸ Bernard Benstock, 'The Three Faces of Brian O'Nolan,' in *Alive-Alive O! Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds*, ed. Rüdiger Imhof (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), 59.

⁹ Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 255.

¹⁰ Myles na gCopaleen, 'A Glass of Punch,' *Irish Writing* 11 (1950), 73.

¹¹ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Joyce Re-approached,' *Irish Writing* 10 (1950), 71–72.

¹² Myles na Gopaleen, 'Drink and Time in Dublin,' *Irish Writing* 1 (1946), 71–77. Reprinted in Vivian Mercier and David H. Greene, *1000 Years of Irish Prose* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1952), 509–515.

¹³ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Donabate,' *Irish Writing* 20-21 (1952), 41–42.

¹⁴ Myles na Gopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1, no. 3 (1952): 3–4.

¹⁵ Myles na Gopaleen, 'The Tired Scribe: A Poem from the Irish,' *Poetry Ireland* 4 (1949): 12.

¹⁶ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (4 August 1947): 7.

¹⁷ See Myles na Gopaleen, *Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976).

¹⁸ For example, see Jon Day, 'Cuttings from *Cruiskeen Lawn*: Bibliographical Issues in the Republication of Myles na gCopaleen's Journalism,' 'Is It About a Bicycle?': *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 32–48.