

The Myles Brand Franchise

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Brian O’Nolan himself never would have envisioned his writings being housed in southern Illinois, but in the Special Collections and Research Center of Southern Illinois University Carbondale’s Morris Library, safe from the hazards of high sweat and humidity, lies, perhaps, the best collection of O’Nolan archives for Flanneurs. Eleven boxes house: correspondence to, about, and from O’Nolan; writings for television (including two series, one planned but unfinished series, and five longer programme plays); manuscripts of all of his novels except *At Swim-two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* (i.e., *The Third Policeman*, *The Hard Life*, *The Dalkey Archive*, and the unfinished *Slattery’s Sago Saga*); writings for solicited articles, essays, and books; writings for solicited and unsolicited advertisements—what I call the Myles jobs; newspaper clippings or cuttings; and photographs. How SIUC originally secured the collection is a rather interesting story. Morris Library began housing Irish Literary collections when Harley Croessmann of Du Quoin, Illinois donated a James Joyce writing. After this, the Special Collections and Research Center continued collecting Irish literature with support of the programme on campus. In 1966, Evelyn O’Nolan contacted Ralph McCoy, the SIUC University Librarian (what was then the equivalent of Dean), while he was in Dublin about her husband’s papers. They were shipped to SIUC in August 1966 and Morris Library paid for the collection.

I was able to carefully comb through all eleven boxes during my five years of doctoral work at SIUC, and among the archival materials mentioned above, I found writings suggestive of O’Nolan’s entrepreneurial side. These writings are fascinating finds in the collection because they show a tactical O’Nolan, a man who worked quietly from home soliciting groups and businesses *via* letter and receiving requests for formed projects to write as his Myles identity (which at this time he begins to think of as a brand). His advertisements and marketing strategies for the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes (as well as other suggestive marketing ploys for Guinness & Co. and other agencies), which date from after he left the civil service and began to write full-time, hint at how O’Nolan sought to shape public thinking while offering his talents for pay. Even when his endeavours made little discernible impact, he continued to try to sell his progressive ideas to the commercial market.

The success of O'Nolan's newspaper columns convinced him to parlay the Myles identity and promote it as a franchise in newspaper ads, television commercials, and even in book projects which he sought out in part but also for which others solicited him. Previous reports of his advertisements have emphasised their commercial value but have argued that they distracted him from his other creative experiments in fiction and journalism. It is easy to legitimate this position, since O'Nolan may have finished *Slattery's Sago Saga* had he focused all his energy on that project.

Yet, Anthony Cronin and Carol Taaffe chose to focus on the composite advertisements for Guinness & Company and O'Dearest Mattresses.¹ Yet he also produced advertisements for the Hospital Sweepstakes which might be thought of as stories, and SIUC's Special Collections and Research Center contains more complete correspondence and drafts concerning these stories. Both Cronin and Taaffe accessed the O'Nolan Collection in SIUC's Special Collections and Research Center and decidedly focused on the materials for Guinness & Co.

The Irish Hospitals' Sweepstakes stories demonstrate O'Nolan's turn to alternative venues for franchising his Myles identity as a legitimate brand, even if his marketing tactics are ultimately inconclusive. The stories for Irish Hospitals Sweepstakes are products that O'Nolan can stand up for; they allow him to promote stable brands in the middle of his career. The Sweepstakes is an annual lottery and local institution, so its mission matches the thoroughly localised Myles brand. In 1958 (if not somewhat earlier), O'Nolan began formulating three distinct stories or advertisements, which he drafted several times for a total of seven documents relating to the Irish Hospitals Sweepstakes project. Each of the advertisement stories is written as a humorous description of one aspect of the Hospitals and Sweepstakes' histories. O'Nolan writes to the firm interested in promoting the Sweepstakes that he has

enclosed a sketch in my Keats-Chapman mode as a suggestion for an illustrated advertising series. I would be glad to know what you think of the idea. To think up even six I think I would require the assistance of drugs, strait-jackets, etc. I shall continue sending sending [sic] you things as ideas come to the surface.²

These advertisements begin with descriptions of what the Sweepstakes is and when it was founded, including why it is associated with the Irish Hospital. He then proceeds in another advertisement to discuss what the Hospital grounds include. It is clear in a final advertisement that O'Nolan hopes consumers will aid the local institution and buy a lottery ticket to help 'Hospitals' Trust keep up its sterling work for the country.³ Additional advertisement drafts vary only slightly in that they

include more detail in one of the above subject areas or include humorous dialogue describing the Sweepstakes from the vantage point of two Dublin citizens.

CAPS Publicity, Ltd., a television production company and division of the Bank of Ireland, began corresponding with O'Nolan in 1958. On 12 March, O'Nolan wrote to the CAPS representative, enclosing drafted articles with the 'Sweep angle': 'They are not very good but may serve till I get my head working properly on this problem of being original about something so familiar.'⁴ I speculate that 'Sweep angle' refers to his ideas for possible advertisements that he might embed as Myles in *Cruiskeen Lawn* because many of the subsequent letters specify his goal of advertising the Hospital stories, and it was often his habit to discuss current events or local institutions and curiosities in the columns. He was drawn to the Sweepstakes ads because of his continuously ailing health. He enclosed two more pieces in a letter to Miss Clyne dated 30 May, punning on his recent debilitating health that he was 'Sweep-aided, alas.'⁵ And a coda to this is his point that the institution was 'so familiar.'

The familiarity of the hospital as an institution provides the warrant O'Nolan likely feels he needs to advertise the Sweepstakes and to be enterprising. It appears CAPS Publicity, Ltd. had been considering O'Nolan's own proposal of the Sweepstakes advertisements for a little over a year. Not until 31 July 1959 did a CAPS representative write him about an advertisement for the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstake. The representative provides a detailed outline for what he expects from O'Nolan:

I have been thinking of doing a half page Letterpress advertisement for the Sweep with a heading something like 'WHAT HAS BEEN DONE.' We are not very clear yet whether there would be one advertisement or several each detailing with something special like employment given by Hospitals' Trust every year and over the years, or some other aspect of the organisation.⁶

The representative explains the purpose or need for the stories: 'that people do not give credit enough or support enough to the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstake.' He continues to clarify the idea of stories in the same letter: 'a lot of money goes to Pools and other concerns outside the country. The advertisement would be in the hope of increasing home support and recognition of the vast amounts of money which are circulated in the country.'⁷ In response, O'Nolan submitted more material on 7 September of that year.⁸

Correspondence about the proposed stories suggests O'Nolan was open to capitalising further on his Myles brand. In a final letter dated 5 April 1963, he conceptualises advertisement stories that include images and print in his unique Mylesian style. But he has discovered problems in the process. He regrets, 'I also think

a series of my own Keats and Chapman stories has possibilities but each would call for a special drawing and, God help us, there is scarcely one decent commercial artist in the whole country.⁹ He also has been searching for old woodcuts to use as visual aids for the Sweepstakes purpose. In the same letter, he lists two problems: finding pictures that are clear enough for reproduction and finding pictures that would evoke comic reactions from people. These problems plagued him in his own newspaper columns, since including old woodcuts was his unique journalistic technique.

These letters reveal that O'Nolan wanted to advertise for the Sweepstakes as Myles because he signs his letters Myles. He essentially has approached the advertisements as stories or columns in a newspaper, and for his audience, it appears that the Sweepstakes stories were an acceptable convention for Ireland.¹⁰ Yet the extent of their role in extending the Myles brand to mass media, or whether the stories were ever run, is inconclusive. It appears O'Nolan became frustrated with Irish convention. At one point, he observes some of the troubles with advertising the Sweepstakes stories in the national press: it is 'good and polished, but "prestige advertising" as it may be, I have often felt it is too solemn and tending to suggest that buying a ticket is a duty before God.'¹¹ He was enterprising enough for the time period, but whether the Irish were ready for the sacred aura of Myles (a brand identity) to be extended to everyday scenarios involving the Irish Sweepstakes, cannot be answered by material in the archives.

Aside from the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstakes stories, we find additional marketing ploys that O'Nolan tried to sell to other corporations. He drafted an idea for a book on the history of the Whiskey Distilling Industry.¹² He contacted Guinness about writing their handbook in Irish.¹³ There are even examples of corporations contacting O'Nolan as Myles to complete projects. An advertising agency contacted him to write television commercials for Guinness,¹⁴ and a publisher from London inquired whether he would write a book on the cultural and literary history of twentieth-century Ireland.¹⁵ These suggest that in his later years O'Nolan was well-regarded for his knowledge of language and Irish culture. Given his esteemed role in Dublin (and London), it made sense for him to work outside of pre-established notions of what authorship is, particularly since he was always undercutting the idea of authenticity. These opportunities show that he was selective when choosing and accepting projects for the Myles franchise. He strategised multiple times in the above examples to make Myles a brand that would be recognised in Ireland. Yet the outcome of all O'Nolan's enterprising only hints at his place in the commercial realm; these advertisements and marketing strategies are more suggestive of O'Nolan's decision to be risky than they are proof of Myles's success as a brand in Ireland. These projects

also include suggestions for future broadcasting material, evidence that O'Nolan was working from multiple planes to promote his own celebrity in Ireland and in London.

Notes & references

¹ Anthony Cronin mentions Guinness commercials and the proposed history book of the whiskey distilling industry in Ireland, noting that 'Guinness did not employ the author [...] as an advertisement scriptwriter and neither did the newly organised Irish Distillers Group warm to the proposal the same author made in 1964.' *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (New York: Fromm International Publishing, 1998), 222–4. Peter Costello and Peter van de Kamp mention the Odearest Mattresses advertisement that O'Nolan allowed Myles to appear in their *Flann O'Brien: An Illustrated Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987). Carol Taaffe also mentions this advertisement and provides a byline for the Guinness commercials while stating the extensive work O'Nolan was putting out after leaving the civil service in 1953. *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 9, 63.

² Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 12 March 1958, Brian O'Nolan Collection, Special Collections and Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois (hereafter SIUC MSS). 'Keats and Chapman' was an irregularly occurring series in Myles's *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns.

³ Myles na gCopaleen, 'It is now thirty years...', Irish Hospitals Sweepstakes, Brian O'Nolan Collection, Box 5, SIUC MSS.

⁴ Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 12 March 1958, SIUC MSS. The letter does not specify that Miss Clyne is the contact representative at CAPS Publishing, but I surmise that she represents the firm because that is the only firm in the Collection to which O'Nolan writes while proposing advertisements/stories for the Irish Hospital Sweepstakes.

⁵ Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 30 May 1958, SIUC MSS.

⁶ Bank of Ireland, CAPS Publicity, Ltd. to Brian O'Nolan, 31 July 1959, SIUC MSS.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 7 September 1959, SIUC MSS.

⁹ Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 5 April 1963, SIUC MSS.

¹⁰ Tony Gray points out that the technique of using other sources for one's columns certainly was noted before Myles began *Cruiskeen Lawn*. It was an Irish habit begun by R.M. Smyllie's father, R. (Bertie) Smyllie, specifically for Irish journalism. *Mr. Smyllie, Sir* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 11–2. Like many journalists at *The Irish Times*, R.B. Smyllie was known for his drinking abilities, and his son became known for the same in his own lifetime. On one occasion where he had been drinking, R.B. Smyllie decided he could not write his column, so he ordered the copy boy to bring him a copy of the *London Times*, and he proceeded to 'carefully cut out the leader, past[e] it down on a sheet of paper, and wr[i]te at the top: "Yesterday *The Times* had this to say about the Irish situation".' Beneath the article, R.B. Smyllie had added, 'And what, pray, does *The Times* think that it means by this?' Myles is carrying forward a practice already part of the *Irish Times* newsroom, but he adds the visual and verbal combination to the technique.

¹¹ Letter to Miss Clyne, CAPS Publishing, Inc., 5 April 1963, SIUC MSS.

¹² Letter to Whiskey Distilling Industry, 30 May 1964, SIUC MSS; ACC Bow Street Distillery to Brian O'Nolan, 3 June 1964, SIUC MSS; Letter to John Power & Son, Distillery, 13 December 1965, SIUC MSS.

¹³ Letter to Lord Moyne, Guinness & Co., Inc., 24 September 1952, SIUC MSS.

¹⁴ L. A. Luke, Guinness & Co., Inc. originally contacted O'Nolan on 5 November 1962, SIUC MSS. Leopold Stork, television producer, S. H. Benson, Ltd. wrote to O'Nolan on 24 November 1961, SIUC MSS. And O'Nolan responded to Leopold in a letter dated 10 December 1961, SIUC MSS. There is also a Sample Guinness Script located in Box 5 of the Brian O'Nolan Collection, SIUC MSS.

¹⁵ Letters regarding the *London Times* and projected Irish language column include: Arthur Crook, *London Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November 1964, SIUC MSS. Letters regarding the book about twentieth-century Irish culture include: Anthony Sheil, Anthony Sheil & Associates, Ltd. to Brian O'Nolan, 11 March 1966, SIUC MSS; Anthony Sheil, Anthony Sheil & Associates, Ltd. to Brian O'Nolan, 13 April 1965, SIUC MSS; Anthony Sheil, Anthony Sheil & Associates, Ltd. to Brian O'Nolan, 21 April 1965, SIUC MSS; Letter to Anthony Sheil, Anthony Sheil & Associates, Ltd., 28 April 1965, SIUC MSS; Letter to Anthony Sheil, Anthony Sheil & Associates, Ltd., 30 April 1965, SIUC MSS.