

# Guest Editor's Note

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About a year ago I placed an order for some more Flann O'Brien books for our university library here in Fiji. Months passed and there was no sign of the books. Eventually I emailed the librarian and inquired about the delay. The books had arrived, but, as the librarian innocently worded it, they'd needed to be 'sent to the rehab centre for stiffening.' O'Nolan's works may never have been censored in Ireland, but he might be comforted by the knowledge that in Fiji at least they warranted a sobering spell in rehab.

When I asked a local artist called Irami Buli to design the cover for this issue, the result was a stained-glass window in which O'Brien and na gCopaleen themes move, defamiliarised by Fijian perspective. I had briefly explained about O'Nolan, and Irami had done some research; the result was an O'Nolan viewed from the modern Pacific through the lens of the internet. This process produced fragmented images of alcohol and violence and murder, with Fionn of the Fianna as Superman, a Fijian third policeman running behind his bicycle, mad scientists with equations emblazoned on their foreheads, eroticised cars – a modern take on the bicycle sex scene –, and question marks on the identity of Flann himself so that he becomes, in an parapractic amalgamation of man and novelist, Flann O'Brian. It brings O'Nolan's works from a northern island to a tropical one, and it makes me think of na gCopaleen's plan to remove Ireland from her moorings and start sailing around the world in search of warmer climes.

Both Irami's cover art and the librarian's email made me wonder if O'Nolan would have liked the Fijian take on his work – both accidentally highlighted alcohol in a way reminiscent of Niall Montgomery's frustrations regarding the draft of *The Dalkey Archive*: 'Could you have the typescript fed into a computer to find out – to the nearest 1000 litres – the amount of drink consumed?'<sup>1</sup> But more than the association of booze and books what this caused me to question was the amount of time we appear to spend, in this growing discipline of Brian O'Nolan studies, thinking about what Brian O'Nolan would have enjoyed, and what he wouldn't. The issue, for me, that we too often return to is that of an implied performative contradiction in philosophical or highly technical academic readings: as O'Nolan spent so much time disparaging academic work and deriding scholarly reactions, so the objection goes, so deeply studious reaction will at best miss the point and at worst become the butt of the joke. Thus, those of us writing on O'Nolan's works could embody gombeen bourgeoisie, members of the baby-brained dawnburst brigade, or peasants in canary-coloured

pullovers thinking we know how to read. Aside from all the obvious problems of grounding our readings in authorial intentionality, to me this concern regarding O'Nolan's sense of how he and his texts relate to knowledge and interpretation misses a dark note in O'Nolan himself. In order to understand the problems of author-centred interpretation, some author-centred understanding of the nature of knowledge is required.

O'Nolan's public attitude to academics was relatively simple: they are 'imposters [...] whose prestige derives from the fact that they burn their midnight oil in the graveyards of dead jargons in which normal people have no interest.'<sup>2</sup> Yet it must be remembered that O'Nolan's attitudes regarding learning are less fixed epistemological positions and more relative reactions to the functionality or commodification of knowledge. At the risk of over-codifying a tendency, it can be simply put: anyone more devoted to pedantry than he was an obsessive, a fool neurotically adrift in esoterica, while anyone less interested in exactitude was a degenerate, a fool determinedly embracing ignorance. Knowledge was rated as excessive or inadequate based on its relative position to O'Nolan's knowledge, and, even more importantly, the financial reward or public position that O'Nolan derived from that knowledge. There is in O'Nolan's works a jealousy of those academic and literary alchemists who could turn lead into gold, that is, knowledge into income. Behind the majority of his *Cruiskeen Lawn* inventions and schemes is the notion of ideas as tender and money for nothing: the sale, for a mere 5 shillings, of a book so limited and exclusive that no copies physically exist.<sup>3</sup>

Another *Cruiskeen Lawn* article proposed that 'the supreme if somewhat esoteric comicality was not to appear at all. Just abstraction, blankness, nullity, for one day. Can you not try to realise the superbness of that gesture, the ... um ... incomprehensible felicity of the nothingness of it all'<sup>4</sup>: the absence of an article with the presence of cash. This is not an attitude of greed or laziness, but the longings of a man who laboured with knowledge for little financial reward. I'm not convinced that even the vitriol with which the 'American thullabawns now infesting Dublin looking for the footprints of James Joyce'<sup>5</sup> are lambasted had anything to do with the scholars themselves, but more with a certain longing that his own works could produce such commentary, as scholars, we all know, purchase books.

If O'Nolan's aggression towards scholarship was born of a certain envy and longing, then there is one more reason that we do not fall into the trap of allowing his prejudice and positions to dictate our engagements. I hope that with every IFOBS conference, with every new issue of *The Parish Review*, with every book and edited collection, we step a little further away from readings dictated to by O'Nolan's own sense of his texts. Inasmuch as O'Nolan's later denial of *At Swim-Two-Birds* has not prevented enthused scholarly engagements, his later refusals to publish *The Third Policeman* has not persuaded us off its inferiority, and his promotion of his final novels

has not convinced us of their calibre, O'Nolan's insistence that he was 'only fooling' should not prevent us from either analysing his jokes, or reading beyond them. The essays in this issue of *The Parish Review* present speculative forays into O'Nolan's writings, offering readings sensitive to the personal, the postcolonial, and the philosophical. They move beyond O'Nolan from within his texts, opening O'Nolan studies while engaging strongly with contexts and grounds. This issue is also delighted to be able to offer Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley's list of the texts held as Brian O'Nolan's personal library in the Boston College collection. This sense of bringing together in a single volume the speculative and the archival, the conceptual and the grounded is one which I hope indicates the ways in which scholarly engagements with O'Nolan can progress; neither dimmed by the shadow of the man, nor incapable of engaging with his outline.

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### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Niall Montgomery to Brian O'Nolan undated, Brian O'Nolan Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

<sup>2</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (hereafter *CL*), 5 January 1942, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *CL*, 7 January 1942, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *CL*, 5 August 1942, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *CL*, 29 August 1949, 4. While noting of course, as Carol Taaffe has shown, that many of the slurs cast on Joyce may have been written by Montgomery.