

# Guest Editor's Note

## O'Brien & Kavanagh: Kicking Against the Pricks

Gerry Smyth

*Liverpool John Moores University*

Whilst attempting to rationalise my filing system in summer 2013, I came across a photocopied set of the thirteen editions of *Kavanagh's Weekly: A Journal of Literature and Politics*, published in Dublin by the brothers Patrick and Peter Kavanagh every Saturday between 12 April and 5 July, 1952. I used this material during the early 1990s as the basis for a chapter in my doctoral thesis. Subsequently published as *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), the book focused on the discourse of literary criticism in Ireland in the 1950s, to which *Kavanagh's Weekly* made an important, if rather eccentric, contribution. This research was heavily influenced by the postcolonial theory so in vogue at that time.

As Kavanagh's biographer Antoinette Quinn puts it: '*Kavanagh's Weekly* captures the *zeitgeist* of a particularly depressing period in Irish history. The country's economic boom was over and its spirits, like its finances, slumped. The atmosphere of apathy and pessimism was almost palpable.'<sup>1</sup> Financed by the poet's brother Peter, the journal was intended to shock contemporary Ireland from what its editors considered to be the dreadful moral, economic, and artistic malaise into which it had collapsed. The brief appears to have been to expose the complacency of the twenty-six-county republic and to offend as many people as possible in the process.

On finding the file with the photocopied material, I remembered that the run included some items by 'Myles na gCopaleen.'<sup>2</sup> As writers, drinkers, and exiled Northerners living in the Big Smoke, O'Nolan and Kavanagh would have known, if not necessarily liked, each other well enough. (The articles in this edition of *The Parish Review* expand upon their troubled relationship). With ca. 9,000 words of copy to find each week, however, the poet must have prevailed upon his younger colleague to support the 'radical' enterprise by the contribution of a few pieces.

O'Nolan had just turned forty-one and would, I guess, have been pretty unhappy with most aspects of his life at the time: job, writing career, country. These pieces bear all the hallmarks of his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns from the period (although 1952 was, in fact, a quiet year on that front, as few *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns were published): the same blend of cynicism, anger, and bitter bemusement is present throughout. His attention – whether satirical (as in the pieces on the 'Phoenix' and

'Tostals') or straight (the contributions on short measures and the Irish language) – is consistently focused on what he refers to as 'the viler and rottener elements in our tiny land.'<sup>3</sup>

Given that these six *Kavanagh's Weekly* pieces are now completely out of circulation,<sup>4</sup> I thought it would be a service to the international O'Nolan community to make them available, as there is plenty to interest scholars looking for connections across the canon. I offered transcribed versions to the General Editors of *The Parish Review* for reproduction as and how they wished. They felt there was enough material to warrant a special number focused around the columns, and the relationship between O'Nolan and Kavanagh leading up to, and in the aftermath of, their brief project together, and invited me to act as Guest Editor. I was happy to accept, and while I got busy commissioning articles and other contributions, they assumed the difficult task of negotiating with the Estate for rights to reproduce the pieces from 1952. In reproducing the *Kavanagh's Weekly* pieces, I have retained the original punctuation and layout throughout, and indicated the few errors I've spotted with *[sic]*. Notes and queries are signalled by square-bracketed numerals and are included at the end of each piece. [*General Editors' note: while O'Nolan's original columns were included in the first publication of this issue of The Parish Review in 2014, the rights have not been extended by the Estate for their republication on the Open Library of Humanities. As such, while we include the original editorial and scholarly articles, the columns themselves are not reproduced in this open-access edition of the journal number – August 2020.*]

Beyond the opportunity to publish these columns together, the time is particularly ripe for reconsidering O'Nolan and Kavanagh's relationship in the peculiar cultural context of 1950s Ireland. This 16 June passed marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the occasion upon which O'Nolan and Kavanagh joined John Ryan, A.J. Levanthal, Anthony Cronin, and James Joyce's cousin Tom for the first Bloomsday pilgrimage around Dublin. The footage filmed by Ryan on the day (which may be found on YouTube) is both hilarious and pretty sad, showing a clearly inebriated O'Nolan stumbling on and off the horse-drawn carriage hired for the day; Kavanagh is not much better. As suggested in the essays which complement the columns in this symposium, this was not an unusual circumstance.

In their contributions to this edition of *The Parish Review*, John Wyse Jackson, Frank McNally, and Joseph Brooker offer powerful perspectives on troubled personalities negotiating troubled times. Typically of the decolonising narrative, Ireland's difficulties and indignities in the years following (partial) independence were many. To my mind, nothing encapsulates that indignity so much as the image of Myles and Paddy in their cups, being held up as figures of fun by a room full of Trinity undergraduates. Their fate, singly and as a generation, remains a potent

symbol of the artist kicking against the pricks of outrageous circumstances.

The number also features reviews by Katherine Ebury and Alana Gillespie of new O'Brien titles from Bloomsbury and Dalkey Archive Press. Ebury considers Maebh Long's *Assembling Flann O'Brien* while Gillespie probes *Flann O'Brien: Plays & Teleplays*, edited by Daniel Keith Jernigan. The cover image was sourced by my serendipitous discovery that a colleague at *Liverpool John Moores University*, Michael O'Shaughnessy, designed the covers for the Paladin series of Flann O'Brien texts in the late 1980s. Michael generously offered the editors free usage of a choice of images from the design process; and this edition features a brief interview with him on some aspects of his experience of designing for O'Brien's novels.

As well as revisiting the past, the issue looks to the future of O'Nolan studies with two Calls for Papers: one, for a future issue of *The Parish Review* on the subject of 'Flann O'Brien and the Culture Industry,' and a second for the III International Flann O'Brien Conference, to be held in Charles University, Prague in September 2015, on the theme of metamorphosis in O'Nolan's writing.

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## Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born-Again Romantic* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1991), 279–80.

<sup>2</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 3 (26 April 1952): 3; 'Our Motoring Correspondent', 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 4 (3 May 1952): 4; Myles na gCopaleen, 'How Are You Off For Tostals?,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 5 (10 May 1952): 4; Myles na gCopaleen, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 6 (17 May 1952): 5; 'Motor Economics,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 7 (24 May 1952): 6; Myles na gCopaleen, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 10 (14 June 1952): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' 3.

<sup>4</sup> A rare facsimile edition published by The Goldsmith Press in 1981 remains the only republication of O'Nolan's contributions to *Kavanagh's Weekly* until the present issue of *The Parish Review*.