

Profits in Their Own Land?

Brian O’Nolan & Patrick Kavanagh¹

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The sorry chronicle of Brian O’Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh in the 1950s is dominated by the twin devils of drink and poverty. A good deal of what they managed to earn during these years was spent on alcohol and related activities; accordingly, many of their ideas and much of their literary output were driven by a desperate need to earn more. A catalogue of the failed schemes that were floated by each of them would be a long one. Few of their ideas came to anything at all, and even the more successful ones brought in very little cash.

The first major conjunction in print between O’Nolan and Kavanagh had taken place in July and August 1940, when they were on opposing sides during the last of the ‘Letters Controversies’ in *The Irish Times*. O’Nolan had orchestrated these bursts of largely pseudonymous letters in the paper in order to poke fun at literary pretension, and he had written many of the best letters himself.² This particular ‘controversy’ was sparked off by Kavanagh’s review of the novel *The Hill is Mine* by Maurice Walsh; though it ended in the trading of insults, it turned out to be artistically and even financially profitable both for O’Nolan and for Kavanagh.

For Kavanagh, the argument apparently prompted the first publication of one of his finest early poems, ‘Spraying the Potatoes,’ for if his brother Peter is to be believed, it was produced in ‘response’ to the ‘noisy controversy over a book review by Patrick.’³ The poem appeared in *The Irish Times* on 27 July 1940, midway through the spate of letters; in due course the poet presumably received the paper’s usual small fee.

For Brian O’Nolan, who was paid nothing for his epistolary contributions, the affair would be a more life-changing matter altogether. The last word on the whole matter had been left to Patrick Kavanagh, who delivered a devastatingly caustic assessment of the literary worth and credentials of his mockers, and of O’Nolan in particular. In the letter that closed the correspondence, he wrote of them in the following terms:

I am referring chiefly to the undergraduate-magazine writers who reached the heights of epic literature in a balloon filled with verbal gas. It was all very

adolescent, though at times faintly amusing.

As I write these words a feeling of deep pity comes over me – the pity that is awakened by the contortions of a clown's funny face. [...] There is tragedy here, and I, for one, am shy to bring to these literary scouts and touts to an awareness of their tragedy. Too soon they will know the misery of literary men without themes, poets without burdens, ploughmen without land.⁴

Such a powerful and, it might be said, justified attack might have silenced many a less confident joker. O'Nolan's undergraduate days were long over. Still, the hoax letters had been the talk of literary Dublin for a fortnight, an achievement not to be lightly overlooked, and he still had hopes for his second novel (*The Third Policeman*), which was currently doing the rounds of publishers. However, what must have hit home was Kavanagh's echo of Frank Swinnerton's review of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in the *Observer*: 'It reads as if it were the work of an Irish undergraduate, [...] uncertain of anything except his own humour and his wish to produce a work of fiction.'⁵ Less than a year before his death, O'Nolan was still condemning his first novel as 'juvenilia, public nose-picking.'⁶

But the final 'Controversy' had not been quite what it seemed. According to Brian Inglis, who got the full story from staff members when he joined *The Irish Times* a few years later, it had been part of a conspiracy to winkle O'Nolan into a job on the paper.⁷ Alec Newman, trusted deputy to the editor, R.M. Smyllie, had for some time believed that a regular column in the Irish language would expand the readership. Newman knew O'Nolan through the Palace Bar on Fleet Street and felt that the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* was the right man for the task. Smyllie had no time for Kavanagh's angry opinions on the matter: he had very much enjoyed the letters – and is even credited with having written one of the sillier ones himself.⁸ He also recognised that the jokey correspondence was boosting sales. Newman had encouraged O'Nolan to send even more bogus letters and then engineered a conversation between him and Bertie Smyllie. The plan worked. O'Nolan was immediately offered a new column in Irish (with the proviso, it has been said, that he should write no more letters to the editor under false names.) And so, in October 1940, Myles na gCopaleen was born.

Despite this unpromising start to their relationship, if such it can be called, within a short time Myles (as everyone was now calling him) and Paddy Kavanagh were on reasonably good terms. That they became more than casual pub acquaintances is suggested by, for example, some throwaway lines in 'Bardic Dust,' Kavanagh's parody doggerel review of Austin Clarke's verse play for radio *The Viscount of Blarney* (1944). Sharing an enemy often creates alliances, and both

Kavanagh and Myles disliked almost everything about Clarke – his domination of the *Irish Times* book page on Saturdays, the superannuated Celtic Twilight diction of his work, the frequency of his broadcasts on Radio Éireann, the enthusiasm of his devotees, many of whom were in positions to offer him lucrative work, and, particularly, his popularity with verse speakers, a class of literary parasite for whom the pair reserved particular venom. In the 'review,' a chorus of 'Clarke's consistent praisers' enters and addresses Kavanagh:

Clarke is the doyen of all Poets, we'll allow no critical
Remarks, but only praise, praise.
Hah! Yourself and Life are nuisances. [...] Go with na gCopaleen on his bus
To dig in slums,
We are Austin's imitative chums.⁹

A special issue of John Ryan's magazine, *Envoy*, was published in April 1951, a little late to mark the 10th anniversary of James Joyce's death. It was edited, in theory at least, by 'Brian Nolan,' whose opening editorial salvo, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' would turn out to be his only considerable excursion into Joycean criticism.¹⁰ This extraordinary essay portrays the author of *Ulysses* as a rebellious but 'fear-shaken Irish Catholic,' whose writings are essentially a private matter between himself and his Muse. However, Joyce's works are also 'a garden in which some of us may play.' Nolan compares the artist to an alcoholic drinking himself into a solitary stupor in the lavatory of a train left in a dark tunnel for several days and nights. He sums up by emphasising how sensitive and knowledgeable one must be to grasp all Joyce's subtleties: 'Perhaps the true fascination of Joyce lies in his secretiveness, his ambiguity (his polyguity, perhaps?), his leg-pulling, his dishonesties, his technical skill, his attraction for Americans.'¹¹

This last of Joyce's attributes was very much to the point. Americans seemed to be taking over 'James Joyce,' and O'Nolan was not alone in playing the anti-American card in *Envoy*. With only one exception – the Trinity classicist W.B. Stanford –, everyone else involved in the issue did so too, including Kavanagh in each of the items he contributed. In an aphoristic diary piece, having announced that *Ulysses* is his second favourite bedside book, the poet fires off various incendiary remarks that put him immediately at odds with the academic interpreters of Joyce across the Atlantic: 'What I think is a mistake is reading deep symbolism into *Ulysses*, drawing comparisons'; 'Almost the most outstanding quality in Joyce is his [...] anti-Protestantism'; 'There is nothing wrong with Joyce, who [...] is sane enough; it is his commentators who are mad.'¹²

Kavanagh's second contribution to the issue is his parody of 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' His point could not have been made more clearly, for the poem is an uncompromising attack on the American Joyce studies phenomenon:

Who killed James Joyce?
I, said the commentator,
I killed James Joyce
For my graduation.

What weapon was used
To slay mighty Ulysses?
The weapon that was used
Was a Harvard thesis.

The verses have often been seen as an allusion to Kavanagh's own part in the 'First Bloomsday' cab expedition, but they predate it by some three years, and it is evidently some academic Joyce scholar (from America?) who proudly announces at the end of the poem:

I made the pilgrimage
In the noonday swelter,
From the Martello Tower
To the cabby's shelter.¹³

On 12 April 1952, *Kavanagh's Weekly* was launched; it lasted until 5 July, thirteen issues in all. Funded by Patrick's brother Peter, plus a very little advertising revenue, and written largely by both of them, the magazine was intended to provide the poet with an income as well as a mouthpiece – *Envoy* (in which he had a column) having folded in July 1951. In the event, it made a considerable loss, and the task of producing and distributing it every week was too much for the brothers. Probably as a favour, or possibly as a *quid pro quo* for Kavanagh's contribution to the Joyce number of *Envoy*, O'Nolan eventually supplied six items of copy, it can be assumed without payment. The suspicion must be that some of these pieces had previously been submitted to and rejected by *The Irish Times*: not all of them are the best work O'Nolan ever produced.

Two of the articles are concerned with the Irish motor manufacturing business, currently an object of Myles's keen attentions. In March 1952, the Corkmen James and Billy Hennessy had been granted a licence to build an industrial plant in the town of

Ballincollig. There they planned to assemble vehicles from parts manufactured by the German company, DKW (*Dampf-Kraft-Wagen*). It would be the firm's only factory outside Germany. Employing some fifteen workers, over the next twelve years the Hennessys were to construct more than 4,000 vehicles, including cars, motor bikes, and even combine harvesters. In these two pieces, Myles ('Our Motoring Correspondent') evidently has something against the enterprising Hennessys – though their real names are not used. He includes a reference to 'suede-shoe-ed spivs who assemble cars'¹⁴ in his first contribution to the *Weekly* ('I Don't Know'), despite the fact that they have nothing to do with the subject. When a week later we meet the spivs in person, directors of the 'Celtic Republican Motor Corporation,' withering scorn is poured upon them for reasons that Myles fails to make clear. As for the car they are manufacturing, the 'Sensational New "Phoenix"'¹⁵ – with specifications as baffling to the lay reader as any of the railway data we have encountered in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* 'For Steam Men' columns – he concludes that prospective purchasers might do better with the B.R.M. This is faint praise indeed, for the latest car from British Racing Motors, the V16 (Type 15), had recently proved itself incapable of travelling in a straight line, much less of going at speed around a circuit. It is unknown from where O'Nolan gleaned his interest in this subject, and why he took so violently against what to the untrained eye seems to be a commendable enterprise, but there may be significance in his opening remark that he had first heard about the sensational 'Phoenix' at a RGDATA conference. The initials stand for Retail Grocery Dairy and Allied Trades Association, an organisation with which Anthony Cronin – poet, critic and close friend of both Kavanagh's and O'Nolan's – had been involved during these years. Insider knowledge is to be suspected.

An Tóstal was a high-profile scheme dreamed up by the Irish Tourist Board and funded by the government – a little like the 'Gathering' of 2013. It would take place over the Easter break in 1953, when local people would be encouraged to organise historical pageants, parades and the like in towns and villages all over the country, and many high-spending tourists would, it was hoped, visit Ireland. After the idea was announced early in 1952, Myles wrote half a dozen pieces on the subject, ranging from the vitriolic to the ludic. Most of them were *Cruiskeen Lawns*, but one appeared in *Kavanagh's Weekly*. In 'How are you off for Tostals,' he identifies the scheme as a pork-barrel project, wondering mordantly 'whether there was money in it, whether it might mean jobs for the eight daughters, or whether, itself, I could get a free ride to New York and back out of Pan-American.'¹⁶ The Irish tourist industry was then in its infancy. *Bord Fáilte* did not yet exist, and a baffling number of rival private and public organisations contended for precedence (as Myles puts it) 'in getting their claws into the pockets of American visitors to get dollars to secure,

among other things, the importation of more American motor cars, and more jam for the motor trade spivs.¹⁷

According to Myles, not only was this 'Festival of Ireland' a more or less immoral act designed to fleece Ireland's tourists, but we also had to learn from an Englishman how to do it. In the summer of 1951, the Festival of Britain, masterminded by Labour Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison, had been a roaring propaganda success: 'Yes, dear readers, we are going to have a Festival of Ireland! It took that ludicrous little Cockney demagogue – known as "Our 'Erbie" – to larn us. Next year our good visitor will find not one but maybe twenty holy Irish hands in their pockets.'¹⁸ Though the Festival of Britain had cost the British economy millions, it had also redirected a great deal of cash into the pockets of artists, writers, actors, architects, and the like. The point did not escape the Dublin literary set.

By December 1952, Patrick Kavanagh was looking into the financial possibilities that *An Tóstal* might offer him. The people running it were 'going around with ten-inch cigars,' he said.¹⁹ They were making pots of money telling everyone how to prepare for the hordes of tourists who would be arriving for the 'monsoon season.'²⁰ He could do that as well as any of them. Needless to say, his country failed to call upon his services. Within a year he had satirically skewered *An Tóstal* with a short poetic drama, *Adventures in the Bohemian Jungle*, in which there appear:

politicians carrying flags, the women correspondents of several newspapers, radio commentators, the President of the Travel Society. This man is showing some Americans around and explaining to them that Necessity Number One is not unavailable in this country. Snatches of the conversation came over:

American:

If there's no sex, what good is my shillelagh?

Travelman:

The situation is improving daily.²¹

Anthony Cronin has summed up to the present writer the prevailing view of the scheme among the Dublin intelligentsia: 'We all hated "*An Tóstal*." We thought it was ridiculous.'²²

It was bad enough that almost every town and village in the land seemed to erupt with marching bands, parades of Catholic Boy Scouts, and displays of country crafts, but when as a symbol of the movement a modernist kinetic sculpture was erected between the lanes of traffic on O'Connell Bridge in Dublin, hostility came out into the open. The 'artwork' was in the shape of a large bowl, boasting a central 'flame' made of red, orange, and yellow plastic, which 'flickered' when set in motion

by the mechanism beneath. This object, officially known as the 'Bowl of Light' (but dubbed 'The Tomb of the Unknown Gurrier' by Maureen Potter), was mocked mercilessly in Dublin, and not least by Myles in his column.²³ Cronin remembers loitering on the bridge covertly chucking bits of gravel at the reviled object until he brought the machinery juddering to a halt by lodging a stone in the cogs. The next day, Brendan Behan handed him a sheet of paper on which he had written a parody of the opening lines of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*:

Awake! For Cronin in the Bowl of Light
Has flung the stone that put the stars to flight.²⁴

The beginning of the end for the Bowl of Light came one day when an open-topped sports car suddenly screeched to a halt beside it. A young man leapt out and up onto the plinth, tore off the plastic flames, threw them into the Liffey, and disappeared in his car as fast as he had arrived. A short time later, the offending bowl itself disappeared, though it is uncertain whether the City Fathers took it away one night and hid it, or if, as is rumoured, a group of rugby players, following a suggestion of Myles, wrenched it off its platform and consigned it to the depths of the river. Whichever fate befell it, the plinth and the housing of the clockwork mechanism were soon filled with earth and planted with municipal flowers. This odd-looking floral display, which became known simply as 'The Thing,' could still be seen between the lanes of traffic on the bridge until the mid-1960s.

Life in the city had not been getting any easier for either Kavanagh or O'Nolan. Alcoholism by now had them both firmly in its grip. They tended to alienate their acquaintances, and they tested the patience of their friends. Famous in Dublin, though not elsewhere, such was their irascibility, unreliability, and unpredictability that they were rarely welcome in the homes of genteel Dublin. Neither of them had regular work – O'Nolan having lost his Civil Service job in February 1953 and Kavanagh being, it seemed, congenitally unemployable. Even *Cruiskeen Lawn* was less dependable as a source of income – hardly any columns had appeared during 1952, for example. Each of the writers was, it is true, occasionally invited to speak at debates in Trinity or UCD, and occasionally they accepted, but such appearances were unpaid. Worse still, accounts of these meetings make it evident that they were both likely to be treated as little more than figures of fun. Typical are the following reports from *Trinity News*:

NO TRADITIONAL CHAIRMAN

At the College Historical Society last Wednesday, speakers were distracted

throughout the evening by criticism from the chair. Maybe Mr Myles na gGopaleen [*sic*] wished to shew his approbation of the motion that 'This House has no Faith in Tradition' by persistently interrupting speakers and ordering them to sit down before they had had an adequate hearing. Mr Brechling proposed that tradition kills initiative. He was told to talk about something else. Proving his own initiative, he did so: he was then told to sit down. [...] Mr F. Pyle [...] tried unsuccessfully to introduce an amendment that this house has no faith in the early closing hours. The chairman then denounced the speeches he had heard as rubbish but did not commit himself on the merits of the early closing hours. [...] Vindicating his constant pleas for relevancy, the chairman summed up by speaking on Egyptology and Arbitration before the crowded meeting was adjourned.²⁵

Kavanagh too spoke in Trinity, less than six months later, at the University Philosophical Society. He brought Cronin with him for support. Undoubtedly, the students were hoping for some similarly memorable fireworks from the Monaghan poet. They did not get them, despite the cynical headline above the report of the meeting in *Trinity News*:

MODERN GENTLEMEN?

Dramatic is the word to describe Kane Archer's paper, 'The Dilemma of the Modern Gentleman,' which he read to a House of nearly 100 people at the 'Phil' last Thursday. The style, form and rendering, in fact, everything about it except its contents, were dramatic. Even Dr Pyle's entry into the House, followed immediately by his exit on being told by the essayist: 'Go South, Young Man' had its dramatic merits. The paper was an attempt to state the case of that unwanted personage, the gentleman with a liberal education but lacking in technical knowledge of a science or of business. Mr Patrick Kavanagh accused the Essayist of treating this serious subject rather flippantly and said that he thought that all who wished to follow the arts should be made to take a technical degree first so as to ensure for themselves some kind of a living.²⁶

Some kind of a living, indeed. The words came from the heart. While the students may have treated this gruff, uncompromising figure with the strange Monaghan accent as a laughable example of someone who could never be a gentleman, Kavanagh, it seems, could not have cared less. What he wanted was a job, in a university or anywhere else congenial: probably he hoped that addressing students within the hallowed walls might somehow help to find him one.

Contempt for transatlantic interest in James Joyce and his works was by now a constant theme with Myles, Kavanagh, and their friends. Reports of the New York James Joyce Society suggested that it was in receipt of considerable sums of money from its rich members. Surely there were ways to harness for profit in Dublin the curious obsession with Joyce that was being shown by Americans. It is difficult now to be certain where the idea of following the route of *Ulysses* originally came from. If, as seems possible, the seed of the plan was sown by Kavanagh's mention of 'the pilgrimage / in the noonday swelter,' it was watered by a fanciful proposal made by Donagh MacDonagh, which appeared at the end of March 1953 as part of a special 'Ireland at Home' supplement in *The Irish Times* to mark *An Tóstal*.

I could take you, as I have taken visiting Joyceophiles, on a whirlwind tour of Joyce Dublin – Holles street, Eccles street, the site of Barny [sic] Kiernan's, the Tower – not at Sandymount, as so many people imagine, but at Sandycove – Davy Byrne's, Leahy terrace, and so on; but it has long been my intention to organise this trip on a commercial basis – a nominal charge of, say, \$100 for a Bloomday [sic] tour of Dublin.

Every June 16th great luxurious buses would take the visiting fans on the complete Bloom-Daedalus route, starting at nine o'clock in the morning at Sandycove Tower, and ending at 2 a.m. in Eccles street, being entertained by Mrs Marion Tweedy Bloom. Refreshments would be served throughout the day – a luncheon in the Ormond Hotel, a glass of Burgundy and a Gorgonzola sandwich at Davy Byrne's. A biscuit tin would be flung at the passengers at Barny Kiernan's, and a dog, Garryowen, would run baying up the street.²⁷

* * *

Bloomsday morning, 16 June 1954. The first full meeting of the James Joyce Society of Ireland was about to take place. Exactly fifty years after the day upon which *Ulysses* is set, the Society was going to retrace the paths of the characters of the novel, with leading participants travelling by horse-drawn cab. The event had been organised by Brian O'Nolan, in collaboration with a group of his friends and acquaintances. Over the previous few days, Seamus Kelly ('Quidnunc' of *The Irish Times*) had given it a great deal of publicity in his column. Members of the public were invited to be part of the occasion, after paying a subscription to the Society. As well as O'Nolan himself, the poet Patrick Kavanagh would be there, and Anthony Cronin of *The Bell*, and Dr A.J. Leventhal, the man who had given *Ulysses* its first review in Ireland. Kavanagh's good friend Elinor O'Brien would be the official photographer. A movie of the tribute

that Dublin was offering to the country's most important writer was also being made, by John Ryan. The events and ceremonies of the day would no doubt receive wide publicity, both at home and abroad.

When the Americans heard about it, next year they would come to Ireland with bulging wallets, and pay handsomely to join in. Our Irish Joyceans were going to make their fortunes...

Notes & references

¹ Some of the ideas in this essay have been adapted from a forthcoming book by Peter Costello and John Wyse Jackson, provisionally entitled *The First Bloomsday*.

² For a selection of this material see Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (Dublin: Lilliput, 2013), 202–26.

³ Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Goldsmith Press, 1988), 373.

⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, Letter, *The Irish Times* (7 August 1940), and *Myles Before Myles*, 226.

⁵ Frank Swinnerton, Review, *Observer*, 19 March 1939.

⁶ Michael Wale, Interview with Flann O'Brien, *Town Magazine* 6, no. 7 (September 1965).

⁷ Brian Inglis, *Downstart* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1990), 152–3.

⁸ 'Art O'Madan,' Letter, *The Irish Times* (14 January 1939): 5.

⁹ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, 153–4.

¹⁰ Although John Ryan is listed on the masthead as usual as the editor of this issue, and in fact probably was the editor, Ryan's introduction to *A Bash in the Tunnel* states: 'I began by inviting Brian Nolan to act as honorary editor for this particular issue'; John Ryan (ed.), *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish* (Brighton: Clifton Books 1970), 13. There is no evidence, however, that 'Nolan' did any editorial work, and indeed no indication anywhere in the magazine that he was even 'honorary editor,' apart from the fact that the title of his essay is prefixed with the words 'An Editorial Note.' With regard to the unusual *nom de plume* 'Brian Nolan' – which the writer also used for 'The Martyr's Crown' in *Envoy* 1.3 (February 1950) – it may be significant that there is an advertisement on page 1 of the Joyce issue for a 'witty and entertaining volume of reminiscences,' *Beatha Dhuine a Thoil*, by 'the late Fr O'Nolan,' an tAthair Gearóid Ó Nualláin, a 'recent publication' at '4s. NET' from *Foilseacha/in Rialtais*. Gearóid was an uncle of Brian's, and it is possible that his use of 'Nolan' as a pen name here owes something to the presence of the ad. Alternatively, it is also quite conceivable that it was John, and not Brian, who chose the poor bare unforked surname over the essay.

¹¹ Brian Nolan, 'A Bash in the Tunnel,' in Ryan (ed.), *A Bash in the Tunnel*, 20.

¹² Patrick Kavanagh, 'Who Killed James Joyce?,' in Ryan (ed.), *A Bash in the Tunnel*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 51–2.

¹⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 1 (26 April 1952): 4.

¹⁵ Our Motoring Correspondent, 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 4 (3 May 1952): 4.

¹⁶ Myles na gCopaleen, 'How Are You Off For Tostals?,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 5 (10 May 1952): 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Qtd in Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), 321.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, 228.

²² Private conversation, November 2010.

²³ See Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist a Young Post-Modernist*, rev. 2nd ed., J. Hillis Miller (foreword) (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 150–53.

²⁴ Behan's parody qtd in Fintan Vallely, *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), entry 'An Tóstal – Ireland at Home.' For the original ['Awake! For Morning in the Bowl of Night / Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight'], see Omar Khayyam, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: A Critical Edition*, ed. Christopher Decker, trans. Edward FitzGerald (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997), 10.

²⁵ *Trinity News*, 25 November 1953.

²⁶ *Trinity News*, 11 March 1954.

²⁷ Donagh MacDonagh, 'The Province of Leinster,' *The Irish Times* (31 March 1953): 19.