

The Lads in the Clouds

Myles na gCopaleen in *Kavanagh's Weekly*¹

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Scholarship on Brian O’Nolan has grown in the last decade. A writer once marginal has been edged closer to the centre of modernist literary studies. One could say that he is no longer reckoned merely a funny man, but the ‘merely’ would misdirect: years spent being funnier than anyone else around are no ‘mere’ (or even mere Irish) achievement. Criticism has been seeking ways to talk about a writer so congenitally comic, even as this presents a challenge to academic tone. *The Parish Review*, the International Flann O’Brien Society, and its recent large international conferences are major evidence of this new scholarly interest. So too is new published research, notably Carol Taaffe’s outstanding *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (2008) and the volumes edited by Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy (2012) and Jennika Baines (2011).² Lately, literally scores of people have been writing and talking about O’Nolan. Different kinds of criticism have been produced in this period of attention. Amid them, a striking element has been a desire to provide stronger grounding for Flann O’Brien studies. At the centenary conference in Vienna, for instance, a consensus emerged about the need for a full, accurate bibliography of O’Nolan’s writing – and of writing about him. The outstanding online bibliography now on the IFOBS’s website has been an impressive response.³

Equally, a demand has been audible for fuller scholarly attention to matters that have been well taken care of in the case of other writers. These include a more fully referenced account of O’Nolan’s own life; the prospect of an annotated *Cruiskeen Lawn*; attention to the writer’s manuscripts and letters; and a study of his reading and how it might relate to his writing. This work has been taken up by Ronan Crowley and Dirk Van Hulle, among others, in discussions of O’Nolan’s letters and his marginal notes on his own library. We can add another element to such scholarship, effectively a specialised branch of biography: O’Nolan’s relations to the literary culture of his time and place, and his interactions with fellow writers and other contemporaries.

The current issue of *The Parish Review* contributes especially to this last tranche. In republishing writing by O’Nolan which has been seldom seen in decades, it contributes to the archive available for scholars. In centring on work from the early 1950s, it offers an unusual focus on this period of O’Nolan’s career, which is little

considered in comparison to the 1930s, early 1940s, or even early 1960s. And in centring on writing in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, it returns us to the question of O'Nolan's relations with other writers, with the literary and publishing scenes of his Dublin lifetime. The essays by Frank McNally and John Wyse Jackson both bring new things to light, while deftly situating the republished work in the context of O'Nolan's peculiar relationship with Kavanagh. In these closing remarks I will look once more at the essays by Myles na gCopaleen and note a few more of their signal features.

First, this is a glimpse of Myles, not *before Myles*, or *away from Dublin*, but *beyond Cruiskeen Lawn*. We strongly associate Myles with the column – we may even say that Myles is a construction of the column, performatively fashioned in its unfolding. It is thus peculiarly apt when Myles writes a letter reporting that 'I am on a few day's [sic] holidays and am writing this note in a Dublin pub.' The character of Myles, it turns out, is transferrable: he can survive outside his usual waters, as long as he remains irrigated. Myles is literally away from work at *Cruiskeen Lawn*, throughout these pieces. But it is a busman's holiday (*gob, there's me bus*) in which he spends his time contributing to another periodical. He has not really gone far from home: 'a Dublin pub' is about as close to home as can be imagined.

The articles display tonal and stylistic features that Myles's readers will recognise. The first line of the first piece – 'What do you think I think of *Kavanagh's Weekly*?' – repeats, and plays upon, the notion of Myles as the ultimate opinion-former, whose view on any matter the public will wish to know.⁴ The casual note of his answer to his question – 'It's not bad at all. It must change, of course' – shows his corresponding tendency to Olympian off-handedness. A familiar pedantry with language is visible: from the 'shock' he expresses at two words in the first *Kavanagh's Weekly*, to the final letter in issue 10 which picks up the same thread and defends the Irish language from the Kavanaghs.⁵ The pedantry about words can turn into word-play itself. Hence, in the first piece, the observation of the word '*portentious*, which I think, speaking as a Dublin man, is *tremendious*.'⁶ Here the Myles of 1952 could be the Myles of 1942: the localised coinage, mocking Kavanagh while nodding to the accents of the streets, is a twinkle of the writer's best.

Myles typically moves between high and low styles. In his first article, this is the mock formality of the Victorian sage or even the prosecuting barrister: 'The three I do not name, for even among the great, jealousy is no stranger.' Within a few lines he is referring to 'the lads in the clouds,' swinging from grandeur to the gurrer.⁷ In issue 7 he elaborately announces: 'Readers must be patient in endeavouring to understand the new techniques governing the financial economy of motor assembly in this land, a spokesman of Celtic Republic told me in an informal chat in the Dolphin.'⁸ Here the sentence could even be said to swing into bathos before it ends, shifting ground from

the oracular 'this land' to the excessively localised 'in the Dolphin.' He is also still able, as so often in the tales of *The Brother*, to fall into another local voice for a whole line. Reporting on a short story in a rival magazine, he asks: 'Know what it's about?,' and answers: 'Now lookat here, keep this under your hat because I want no scandal, because it's about a girl who, unwed, has a babby.'⁹ The dialect of this momentary speaker is not strongly emphasised, but there are just enough idiosyncrasies – 'lookat' and above all 'babby' – to tell us that this is, in effect, someone else thinking: someone Myles disdains and condescends to, and hence frames in mildly phonetic words. This putative speaker is too easily scandalised, making a superfluous fuss – and hence generating scandal that the magazine hardly merits. Myles's relegation of the speaker indicates his own worldliness next to its immaturity about supposed scandals: in effect, the speaker's attitude is babbyish.

Another characteristic comic touch is the literalised metaphor. A car factory is 'surrounded by a tariff wall one hundred feet high and two yards broad, said to be modelled on [the] ancient Great Wall of China.'¹⁰ The move makes us reflect a moment on the phrase 'tariff wall,' pausing at its gates rather than simply accepting it as figurative. We are momentarily in a textual world when the figurative, being literalised, is perhaps literally concrete. Myles likes the image enough to repeat it, in a slightly different context, in the following issue, writing of:

a prominent Irish industrialist who, any time he wants to get into town to get drunk in the golf club, has to telephone for the Dublin Fire Brigade's enormous Merryweather with the telescopic ladder that can be extended enough to rescue the tycoon from the confines of the 100-foot tariff wall which surrounds his estate.¹¹

The literalised metaphor is introduced this time only at the end of an extended yarn of a sentence, which would arguably contain sufficient comic material even without the pay-off. Its late entry, if anything, makes it even more effective, suddenly skewing the sentence with an extra jab of wit – except perhaps for readers who remember the phrase from the previous time Myles used it.

In another shift of perception, there is wilful incongruity in the way Myles discusses Tóstals. We may take a singular Tóstal to be a festival, but Myles makes them out to be more like an imported consumer good. His industrialist reports that 'I think we have a fair stock on [our] hands. I don't mean that we're not in the market for more if they're cheap. Stockpiling, you know.' Myles himself has 'twenty-four bales at the most, still down below on the kays.'¹² Tóstals seem to be like ball bearings or cigarettes: they have been suddenly transformed here from one kind of item (an event occurring

through time and space) to another (an object, bounded, multiple, transportable). We could say that Tóstals have been reified; with the suspicion that Myles would have turned that word in turn into something else. (Refried?) The gesture shifts our sense of the modality of Tóstals: it literally belittles them, while also suggesting their excessive frequency. They appear to be mass produced, rather than a celebration of authentic folk culture that is precisely produced in opposition to mass production. And as an import, provided from 'Ceylon, Malaya, Hong-Kong,' authentic Irishness seems to be a quality the Tóstal noticeably lacks. As a satirical effect, the manoeuvre is remarkably effective and economical.

Myles deploys deadpan humour – as in the single-sentence paragraph following a definition of something vast: 'For some reason I began to think of Mr Smyllie.'¹³ And he dallies with the superfluous play on words, maintaining a droll tone: 'the jacking up of the price (as distinct from the car).'¹⁴ There is also notably, in the article from issue 4, a kind of fiction-making at work. What seems a genuine starting point about a motor car manufacturer metamorphoses into a narrative of exaggeration and preposterous characters. One magnate, Mr Guggenheimer-O'Hara, demonstrates a final O'Nolan motif, in complaining of the role he is forced to maintain as a captain of industry. In a uniform of 'stove-pipe trousers of blanket cloth,' he is 'expected to be as good as the next man, give public evidence of prosperity, and get drunk every night in that golf club! EVERY NIGHT! And lose a hundred notes a night at what is called poker.'¹⁵ What this recalls is the motif in *The Poor Mouth* in which characters dutifully live up to their stereotypes: 'In each cabin there was [...] one man at least, called the "Gambler", a rakish individual, who spent much of his life carousing in Scotland,' and so on.¹⁶ To play oneself, in this mode, is like working at a job; and to have a job (like Mr Guggenheimer-O'Hara) is to take on a self, its trappings and activities.

Stepping back, finally, to consider the writer's concerns: two particular themes characteristic of O'Nolan, especially of this middle stage of his career, can be identified in the *Kavanagh's Weekly* writings. One is the notion of fair dealing: a polemic summed up in the first article's final assault on the 'suede-shoed spivs who assemble cars, the drunken newspaper people, the dirty publicans who gave short measure and won't wash glasses, and the great congregation of rural morons whom no political party dare tax.'¹⁷ The car is to recur in further articles: Myles's 'Phoenix' from Celtic Republic cars breaks down 'near Newtownmountkennedy' and he takes a lift to 'the nearest boozier' in a 'turf-lurry.'¹⁸ The theme is of poor-quality production, specifically from an Irish manufacturer. Such low professional standards are evidently also to be found in pubs' short measures, though one hopes that the disdain for 'the drunken newspaper people' is a self-reference to ironise the passage's ire slightly, rather than showing a spectacular

lack of self-awareness.¹⁹ The Myles of this broadside is the same one who attacks public money going to the Gate Theatre to take *Hamlet* to Denmark: 'Who, among the multitude, pays for this adventure? I do.'²⁰ This is the Myles – the furious bureaucrat keen to pay his own taxes on time – of whom none other than Kavanagh complained: 'the poor fellow actually takes himself seriously as the ratepayer's friend.'²¹

The second major theme is Ireland – as in the assault on what Myles perceived as the synthetic nationalism of An Tóstal – and specifically the place of the Irish language. Myles's defence of the language in his last contribution is precise, to the point of paradox: 'Any notion of reviving Irish as the universal language of the country is manifestly impossible and ridiculous but the continued awareness here of the Gaelic norm of word and thought is vital to the preservation of our peculiar and admired methods of handling English.'²² As Taaffe has shown, on this issue Myles was consistently inconsistent, ambivalent or opportunistic, defending and attacking the use of Irish depending on the occasion.²³ Here he seems to find a way to do both. His defence of the language's role in forming Hiberno-English does, though, echo O'Nolan's sincere-looking affirmation in a letter to Sean O'Casey in 1942 that Irish supplied the 'unknown quantity in us that enables us to transform the English language.'²⁴ His final contribution to *Kavanagh's Weekly* thus insists on that peculiar quantity in the English of the Irish – including, perhaps, Kavanagh himself. In the first issue of the journal, Kavanagh had assailed the 'victory of mediocrity' in postcolonial Ireland. Yet he and Brian O'Nolan provided a counterweight to that purported victory in Irish cultural history, bequeathing us their own idiosyncratic story of modern Ireland even as they railed against the state, car manufacturers, publicans, the plain people, and each other.

Notes & references

¹ Joseph Brooker offers an in-depth consideration of O'Nolan and Kavanagh's writing in his forthcoming chapter 'Ploughmen without Land: Flann O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 93–106.

² Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008); *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 'Is it about a bicycle?' *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).

³ 'The IFOBS Brian O'Nolan Bibliography,' www.univie.ac.at/flannobrien2011/bibliography.html

⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 3 (26 April 1952): 3.

⁵ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Letter to the Editor,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 10 (14 June 1952): 5.

⁶ Na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' 3

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 'Motor Economics,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 7 (24 May 1952): 6.

⁹ Na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' 3.

¹⁰ 'Our Motoring Correspondent', 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 4 (3 May 1952): 4.

¹¹ Myles na gCopaleen, 'How Are You Off For Tostals?,' *Kavanagh's Weekly* 5 (10 May 1952): 4

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ 'Motor Economics,' 6.

¹⁵ 'Our Motoring Correspondent', 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' 4.

¹⁶ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 447.

¹⁷ Na gCopaleen, 'I Don't Know,' 3.

¹⁸ 'Our Motoring Correspondent', 'The Sensational New "Phoenix",' 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990), 190.

²² Myles na gCopaleen, 'Letter to the Editor,' 5.

²³ Taaffe, chapter 4.

²⁴ Qtd in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 131.