

A Note on the Flann O'Brien Collection at the John J. Burns Library at Boston College

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The Flann O'Brien Collection at the John J. Burns Library at Boston College was acquired from Brian O'Nolan's brother, Michéal ÓNualláin, who was largely responsible for assembling it. In 1996, he began working with the Irish auction firm George Mealy & Sons to offer the collection for sale. In February 1997, Burns Librarian Robert K. O'Neill visited the collection in ÓNualláin's home and a contract for purchase was signed shortly thereafter. In April 1997, the collection was boxed and crated for air transport. Since its arrival, the Flann O'Brien Collection remains one of the Burns Library's most frequently consulted collections. A rich and varied treasury of manuscripts, it offers a look into everything from O'Nolan's everyday life in twentieth-century Dublin to his university studies, journalism, and literary endeavours.

Manuscripts in the collection include: the original typescript of *The Third Policeman*, signed by O'Nolan; the original typescript of the first three chapters of *The Hard Life* with O'Nolan's handwritten corrections; a carbon copy of the typescript of *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)*, also with his handwritten corrections. Also included are *The Dead Spit of Kelly*, an original typescript of a play in four parts with the title hand-lettered by O'Nolan writing as Myles na gCopaleen, and a carbon copy of O'Nolan's master's thesis on Irish nature poetry at University College Dublin.

The collection also includes O'Nolan's extensive and diverse personal library, which can be mined for his insights into his writings and perspectives on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publishing history. The personal library of over 400 titles covers myriad topics in 15 different languages. The large numbers of translations of O'Nolan's own works gives evidence of the stature of his writings in other countries, chief among them Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Scotland, and Sweden. Michéal ÓNualláin continued to add new editions and translations of his brother's works following O'Nolan's death in 1966. In addition to O'Nolan's books and manuscripts, the collection includes several paintings, mostly by his brother, Michéal ÓNualláin, as well as some artefacts that offer a vivid insight into the author's personal life and the times in which he lived.

One interesting artefact held by the Burns Library is O'Nolan's typewriter. A carbon copy of a letter of complaint to Underwood Business Machines Ltd., from O'Nolan in 1953 tells its story; the machine worked wonderfully for twenty years, but then it developed a problem with the ribbon. O'Nolan asked that a service person from the company attend to the repair and cleaning of the machine after years of erasure debris had fallen into its moving parts. Dissatisfied with the repair, O'Nolan noted the impact it was having upon the typography of his writing: 'a misalignment of a capital initial with the rest of the word in lower case plus a tendency for a double-space to turn to become a treble-space.' Adding to his frustration, O'Nolan received two bills from Underwood, one of them for the repair of an accounting machine! This prompted O'Nolan to write: 'This small transaction may make you wonder what sort of damned nonsense is going on in your Dublin office.'¹

The Burns Library welcomes researchers to use the Flann O'Brien Collection. Here are some ways you can engage with or contact the library:

Email: burnsref@bc.edu

Facebook: [facebook.com/johnjburnslibrary](https://www.facebook.com/johnjburnslibrary)

Twitter: twitter.com/burnslibrary

Flickr: [flickr.com/photos/bc-burnslibrary](https://www.flickr.com/photos/bc-burnslibrary)

For a complete inventory of manuscripts and other material in the Flann O'Brien Collection, see the finding aid inventory at <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/1136>.

Notes & references

¹ Brian O'Nolan to Underwood Business Machines Ltd., 9 September 1953, Flann O'Brien Collection, MS97-27, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.