

Report

#Flann50: Celebrating Myles Day 2016 at the Intensive Care Unit

Catherine Ahearn

Boston University

This year, 1 April marked the 50th anniversary of Brian O’Nolan’s death and the occasion for many commemorations of the author’s life from Gortahork to Barcelona.¹ Online, Flanneurs and Mylesians exchanged their favourite quotes, voted in Twitter polls, and shared images of their own observances under the tag #Flann50. And in Dublin, fans, admirers, and people-who-just-happened-to-be-there gathered at the Palace Bar on Fleet Street to celebrate Myles Day through a series of readings and performances. It’s a testament to O’Nolan’s legacy that the anniversary’s events seamlessly invoked (at least) two of his pseudonyms for the commemorations (Myles Day and #Flann50), a fact that speaks to his authorial style and our own issues with how to remember it.

To put it plainly: the bar was packed. I arrived 20 minutes before the first reading and realised quickly there would be no chance of a spot with a view; I’d have to listen along near the bar. Except the bar, too, was three or four people deep. It may not have been the best arrangement for a popular reading, but the event’s location was no accident. If you’ve ever been to the Palace Bar, you’ll remember that it’s a long, narrow pub until you get to the back room, which is really more of a parlour. It’s also a place of lore, one in which, according to the Palace Bar’s own website, R. M. Smyllie, O’Nolan’s editor at *The Irish Times*, ‘held court every evening. Heavy drinking and debating took place in this room and it came to be known as “the intensive care unit”.’² On another page, the bar takes credit for facilitating the meeting of Smyllie and O’Nolan, which led to the commencement of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.³ Today, the dark wood panelling that once surrounded its famous patrons now holds photographs of them, and on Friday, 1 April 2016, the space served Myles Day well.

It’s often said that O’Nolan published *Cruiskeen Lawn* until the very day of his death from throat cancer on Friday, 1 April 1966, but that isn’t quite true. His last new column ran on Wednesday, 16 March 1966 and in it he takes up his usual prodding of Seán Ó Faoláin and a rant about censorship:

Every line of this newspaper is censored. Your clothes, even the cut of the collars of your shirts, are censored. [...] Your language is censored. [...] Even at death (if it is to be called a happy one) the censor is present; he proffers certain conditional exculpations and may make what seem to be unreasonable references to 'divine justice.' Which of us is anxious at the end to get our deserts?⁴

Before that day's column, *Cruiskeen Lawn* had only appeared in *The Irish Times* on fifteen occasions in 1966, presumably owing to O'Nolan's deteriorating health. Earlier in March of that year, to help meet the demand for more Myles, the paper had announced a throwback series of columns: 'Veteran readers of "Cruiskeen Lawn" may remember the series of article in the 'forties, in which Myles na Gopaleen compiled, with deadly accuracy, a compendium of clichés and automatic phrases [...]. Next week, interrupting his regular series, we are reprinting some of them.'⁵

Following this weeklong 'interruption,' Myles only published twice more, once on 14 March and again on 16 March. He may have been done writing, but *The Irish Times* was not done publishing his work. Again on 26 March 1966, the paper ran an announcement titled 'Myles':

MYLES NA GOPALEEN informs us that he has other things to do for the next few weeks. We are bidden not to surmise too much; there is no hint that he is out on his keeping. Until he returns to the book-lined study at Santry, however, we are to let the present generation of *Irish Times* readers see what their ancestors enjoyed in the days when The Brother meant only one person and The Plain People of Ireland found their original scribe. From Monday, and until Myles appears with further orders, we dip into the riches of the well-nigh bottomless Cruiskeen.⁶

It seems that Myles was right; especially on the days leading up to his death, the censor was present.

John Clarke, who has organised all six Myles Day celebrations in Dublin, was again at the helm of the four-hour event. At first I tried to keep track of the readings, but soon understood that this was plainly impossible. Days later, when John responded to my request for the names of those who participated in the day, he passed along an excel spreadsheet. I opened it to find a very serious document, indeed. Divided by hours and colour coded, there it was, all of Dublin's Sixth Annual Myles Day Celebration laid out for me (John even included himself in the rundown, as though he wasn't the man in charge). Val O'Donnell was the initiating performer, and was front-loaded on the agenda so he could make it to his one-man show *Flann's Yer*

Only Man, running that week at the Loose End Studio. In the second hour, Siún Ní Dhuinn read 'Smaointe' from *Cruiskeen Lawn* in a performance that made the ten present Irish-speakers red-faced with laughter and everyone else envious and finding they were, possibly for the first time, seriously considering learning the language. Hour three included Henry Mitchell's 'Myles's Political Cliché Quiz,' and the final hour began with Andrew Basquil's 'Myles Day Song 2016.' Other participants included Racker Donnelly, Paul Maher, Brenda O'Riordan, Mattie Lennon, Peter Prior, Ann Russell, Tony McGaley, Tim Casey, Louis O'Byrne, Frank Swords, Phelim Drew, Vincent Kenny, Jack Lynch, Aidan Jordan, Jim O'Farrell, and Jim Butler.

Myles Day 2016 reminded us just how plentiful the riches of that well-nigh bottomless *Cruiskeen* really are. The readings ranged from excerpts of O'Nolan's work to original skits and stories inspired by his writing. Everyone who participated sought to invoke that unique Mylesian tone: biting, but too funny and on-point to truly offend (well, usually). The crowd remained at the ready, beer in hand, eager to laugh with each new reader, to remember, and to see a bit of O'Nolan in any new material brought before it. Much like *The Irish Times* of March 1966 – the days before anyone knew he would never return with further orders – the event reminded readers of the 'Myles' past generations had enjoyed. Myles Day continues to serve as a forum for recalling and honouring his work, hilariously unmitigated and shockingly relevant. Next year, though, I'll get there a bit earlier.

Notes & references

¹ From 12–13 February, Brian Ó Nualláin's connection with the Donegal Gaeltacht was celebrated in Gortahork (<http://slinagcopaleen.tumblr.com>), while on 14 April, Barcelona enjoyed an *Acte commemoratiu del 50è aniversari de la mort de Flann O'Brien* (<http://www.amicsunescofcn.cat/events/conferencia-lectures-imusica-connecta-acte-commemoratiu-del-50e-aniversari-de-la-mort-de-flann-obrien/>).

² <http://www.thepalacebardublin.com/#pages/History/R.M.%20Smylie>.

³ <http://www.thepalacebardublin.com/#pages/History/Irish%20Writers>.

⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, 'Censor Neurosis,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (16 March 1966): 10.

⁵ Anon., 'Next Week in the "Irish Times",' *The Irish Times* (5 March 1966): 1.

⁶ Anon., 'Myles,' *The Irish Times* (26 March 1966): 1.