

Guest Editors' Note

An Béal Bocht at 75

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Since the publication of Breandán Ó Conaire's landmark study *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* in 1986, Irish-language scholarship on Brian O'Nolan and his various pseudonyms has been diverse and productive. The inspiration for this issue of *The Parish Review* came a year ago during the planning of *Seachtain na Gaeilge* events in Maynooth University.¹ As part of the organising committee, we wanted to use the occasion to mark the 75th anniversary of *An Béal Bocht* and the 50th anniversary of Brian O'Nolan's death. The idea of an Irish-language conference on *An Béal Bocht* was floated and a panel consisting of the Irish-language scholars and activists Breandán Ó Conaire, Ian Ó Caoimh, and Siún Ní Dhuinn was assembled for the symposium. The conference was a great success and discussed topics ranging from O'Nolan's career in journalism to the continued success of *An Béal Bocht* as an Irish-language text.

O'Nolan's work has acted as a centripetal force around which a healthy Irish-language community has grown in universities both in Ireland and abroad. The Maynooth event provided a public platform to take stock of both the author's legacy to, and the light that has been cast on his writing by, Irish-language scholarship. Gaeilgeoirí relished in the conference, which concluded by heralding in a new generation of undergraduate Irish-language O'Nolan scholars who presented a series of exciting and dynamic papers on his works. Amid these anniversary celebrations and reflections, Irish-language broadcaster TG4 aired *Flann O'Brien: An Béal Saibhir*, a documentary on O'Nolan and his works directed by Brian Reddin. The film brought together dramatic readings and interviews with Irish-language scholars with scenes from the International Flann O'Brien Society's 2015 conference in Prague, demonstrating the increasingly international contexts in which O'Nolan's Irish-language work is being read and discussed. The continued cultural and creative relevance of *An Béal Bocht* is evidenced in a series of recent creative adaptations in diverse visual genres. Following on the success of Colmán Ó Raghallaigh, Breandán Ó Conaire, and John McCloskey's striking graphic novel adaptation,² Pearse Moore, Tom Collin, and McCloskey's short film *An Béal Bocht* has been sweeping the awards at the

Galway Film Fleadh and Foyle Film Festival, guaranteeing its consideration for the 2019 Oscars.

While the original idea for this special issue of *The Parish Review* arose from the events of *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, the range of essays featured in this issue reflects the growing internationalism of Irish-language O'Nolan scholarship. The work of Irish, Czech, and North American scholars is all variously represented here, and it is a great honour to collaborate with such a rich and diverse cross-section of Flanneurs and Mylesians. The work of these scholars is especially important some 75 years since the original Irish publication of *An Béal Bocht* and demonstrates the continuing relevance of the original Irish-language version of the text despite its chequered history of translation. (In keeping with the theme of the journal, all quotes from *An Béal Bocht* have been kept in their original Irish with some authors contributing their own translations where necessary.) The essays gathered here deal with a diverse range of topics related to O'Nolan and *An Béal Bocht*, from the author's background in the Irish language and its literature to the novel's (post)modernist sensibilities. As such, the issue exhibits O'Nolan's continued recalcitrance toward definitive critical formations with a due emphasis on his Irish-language work.

The first piece by Breandán Ó Conaire is an English-language version of his lecture '*An scoláireacht laistiar den scéalaíocht*' (The Scholarship Behind the Storytelling) which was presented during Éigse Cholm Cille 2014 at the University of Ulster as part of a series of lectures delivered under the title *Scoláirí Gaeilge Iarthar Uladh* (Irish Scholars of West Ulster) in 2014. The essay features a detailed discussion of O'Nolan's educational development as a writer and thinker, as Ó Conaire unveils the richness of O'Nolan's intellectual background in the Irish language and Irish-language literature. In doing so, the essay places the author within a rich heritage of scholastic learning before finally discussing O'Nolan's frustrations with Irish-language academia. The essay also features a fascinating postscript featuring passages from *An Béal Bocht* juxtaposed beside their original source texts.

Gregory Darwin's essay takes its cue from O'Nolan's foreword to the third edition of *An Béal Bocht*, in which Myles na gCopaleen declares that 'a copy of this book ought to be placed in every home where there is a love for Ireland's "Seanchas",' the traditional oral modes of cultural folklore which were so vociferously venerated as hallmarks of an authentic Gaelic cultural identity by the Irish-language revival movement. Taking up this invitation to read *An Béal Bocht* and the *seanchas* side-by-side, Darwin finds that O'Nolan's parodic treatment of the latter is deployed as a critique of an essentialist national identity forged on the back of a rural 'poverty that urban intellectuals simultaneously praised and refused to experience for themselves.' Plotting its way through several key episodes in *An Béal Bocht*, the essay shows how

O'Nolan exposes the material conditions of abject poverty experienced by the citizens of Corca Dorcha. Accordingly, Darwin positions O'Nolan as an author who exposes the asymmetrical relationship between the rural and the urban, between those who supposedly represent an authentic Irish culture and those who construct such notions of national identity.

Radvan Markus's essay complicates this conversation as it broadens the scope and ambition of O'Nolan's works. Rather than reaffirming *An Béal Bocht*'s status as a parody of other Irish-language texts, Markus bridges the gap between *An Béal Bocht* as Gaelic satire and the (post)modernism of O'Nolan's English-language novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. The essay explores the influence of German pre-Romantic and Romantic philosophers, such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, on the language revival movements which swept through Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Markus's essay thus places O'Nolan's works in Irish into a productive critical dialogue with continental philosophies of language and cultural identity. In doing so, Markus argues that *An Béal Bocht* exhibits many of the same literary and linguistic (post)modern tropes found in O'Nolan's English-language novels: '*An Béal Bocht* should be regarded as an important precursor to postmodernism in exactly the same way as O'Nolan's English writing is nowadays seen.'

Finally, an essay from Brian Ó Conchubhair examines *An Béal Bocht* as a modernist reinvention of the traditional Bildungsroman novel. By demonstrating how *An Béal Bocht* simultaneously plays with the conventions of the Gaeltacht Bildungsroman and deploys modernist invention, Ó Conchubhair, much like Markus's preceding essay, demonstrates the importance of including *An Béal Bocht* in those critical conversations which laud O'Nolan's English-language works for their literary radicality. In this context, *An Béal Bocht* is positioned as a text which, through a series of inversions and reinventions of the tropes of the Bildungsroman novel, sheds a 'light on the warped nature of Irish society and cultural politics in the interwar years' by tearing down the ideologically constructed notion of cultural identity and uncovering 'the gap between lived reality and imagined experience.'

We are also delighted to include a translation of O'Nolan's 'Pisa Bec Oc Parnabus' which first appeared in 1935 and was later published in *Ireland To-day* in February 1938. The piece may be read as O'Nolan's Irish-language take on James Joyce's *Work in Progress* (later published as *Finnegans Wake*) and has been collaboratively translated into English for the first time by Tobias Harris, John Wyse Jackson, and Thomas O'Donnell. Furthermore, we are happy to include Maebh Long's review of Christine O'Neill's *Niall Montgomery: Dublinman* as well as Tom Dillon's review of Jack Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction*. This issue also features conference reports by Yaeli Greenblatt on *Acting Out: IV International Flann O'Brien Conference*, held in

Salzburg University in July 2017, and Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston on *Irish Modernisms: Gaps, Conjectures, Possibilities*, held at the Vienna Centre for Irish Studies in September 2016. On a more sombre note, Frank McNally reflects on the recently departed Micheál Ó Nualláin—a pioneering artist and writer in his own right and the last surviving member of the O'Nolan siblings—and Bruce Stewart writes in memory of Anthony Cronin—who was, among many things, a renowned critic, poet, novelist, and author of the pioneering and influential books *Dead as Doornails*, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, and *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*. As well as the usual letters to the editor and a checklist of O'Nolan studies for 2015–16, the issue announces the winners of last year's society awards and closes with a Call for Papers for a future issue of *The Parish Review* on the *Intersections of Form and Identity* in O'Nolan's writing.

We would like to extend our gratitude to all contributors to this special issue for their time and expertise and we hope you enjoy the fruits of their hard work.

Notes & references

¹ Seachtain na Gaeilge consists of Irish organisations, schools, third level institutions and communities celebrating the Irish language in the lead up to St Patrick's Day. During the fortnight of celebrations, events are organised nationwide to encourage and promote our national language.

² See 'A Graphic Novel: John McCloskey and Breandán Ó Conaire on the Making of *An Béal Bocht*,' in *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2013).