

Note

When is a Fahrt not a Fahrt?

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Recent news of the biennial voting for the Father Kurt Fahrt, S.J. Memorial Prizes had me once again wondering about a possible source for this character. The awards, as you are all no doubt aware, are named in honour of Father Kurt Fahrt, a Catholic priest of the Society of Jesus, who are also known as Jesuits. Father Fahrt is German, even though the order is originally French, but is currently stationed with the Leeson Street community in Dublin. At least, he was stationed there in opening years of the 20th century, according to *The Hard Life*, where he mostly appears as a conversational foil to Mr Collopy, the half-uncle of the book's narrator, Finbarr.

One of Brian O'Nolan's stated intentions for the character of Father Fahrt was as an irritant to the Catholic Church in Ireland, and to the general public, in the hope that the book might be banned – allowing him leave to appeal the decision and win his case, as there was actually no case in law for the banning of a book on such grounds. No-one, however, rose to the bait, unsurprisingly. There were certainly plenty of books being banned in Ireland, even in 1961, when *The Hard Life* was published, but O'Nolan, it seems, was too ingrained in his own Catholic faith to have actually transgressed against it, despite his opinion of the Church in general and the Jesuits in particular. O'Nolan always wanted to be banned, but I think that he never could bring himself to write something properly ban-able, even in those times, when it was much easier thing than it is now. The word Fahrt is German, and means, rather than any sort of bottom burpery, simply a journey. Back when he was a lowly undergraduate in University College Dublin (UCD), O'Nolan studied German, so it is without doubt that he knew this, and it would have been his defence in case *The Hard Life* became *verboten*. However, it is possible that Father Fahrt, and in particular his name, might have his roots in an earlier, also largely fictitious, man of the cloth.

About a century before O'Nolan was doing his time in UCD, there was another Irishman writing humorous, and often barbed and caustic, articles for assorted periodicals. The Rev. Francis Sylvester Mahony, a Corkman by birth, adopted the guise of a recently deceased clergyman, Father Prout, the late parish priest of Watergrasshill in County Cork. Under this name – and occasionally as Don Jeremy Savonarola, Benedictine Monk – he wrote for *Fraser's Magazine*, *Bentley's Magazine*, and *The Daily*

News. The Father Prout pieces were supposedly published posthumously, purported to have been found in the trunk of the late parish priest, possibly in itself a useful measure to avoid prosecution. Francis Mahony himself was an interesting character. He studied to be a Jesuit priest and had a position as the master of rhetoric in Clongowes Wood College, a secondary boarding school for boys in County Kildare which would later attempt to teach James Joyce. He was, however, dismissed from his position for leading the boys under his charge on a drunken spree in the nearby town of Celbridge, which also put an end to his vocation with the Jesuits. He was later ordained in Rome, regardless, and although he did not practice as a priest, he remained faithful to the church.

Father Prout's fictitious biography was in many ways a foreshadowing of some of O'Nolan's own pseudonyms – at one point he claimed to be the son of Dean Swift and his English friend Esther Johnson, known as Stella. He also produced translations of the works of Thomas Moore in classical languages, claiming that they were the originals, and that Moore had plagiarised them. He wasn't fond of Daniel O'Connell, either, whom he referred to as the 'bogtrotter of Derrynane,' and as 'Vile Dan.' Prout's work was collected in various volumes, as *The Reliques of Father Prout*, under the editorship of Oliver Yorke, and with an introduction by Frank Cresswell, both further *noms de plume* of Mahony's.

The Rev. Francis Mahony died on 18 May 1866, almost exactly a hundred years before O'Nolan, probably due to a partiality for the drink. Although almost forgotten now, except as the author of the poem 'The Bells of Shandon,' Mahony's life and that of his creation, Father Prout, have a few things that might be of interest to Mylesians – aside from his fondness for drink, his multiple pseudonyms, and a little literary mayhem. One of these is the odd coincidences surrounding a book called *Two Studies in Integrity*, published by Jarrolds in 1954. One of the two studies is of Mahony. The other is of Gerald Griffin, who wrote *The Collegians*, the original source for the character Myles-na-coppuleen, later to become Myles na gCopaleen, under which name O'Nolan wrote his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column for *The Irish Times*. The book itself was written by Ethel Mannin, to whom O'Nolan sent a copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* in July 1939, presumably hoping for a favourable response, which he certainly did not get. What is the universe trying to tell us, by lumping together these four writers? God may know, but I do not.

The other thing, which brings me finally back to where I began, is that Prout is French slang for a fart. When is a Fahrt not a Fahrt? When it's a Prout, perhaps.