

Review

Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), xvii + 159 pp. ISBN: 978-1-56478-889-4

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The disappointment of Brian O'Nolan's career was that it effectively ended just as it was beginning, with three brilliant novels written in quick succession. This new collection is offered as 'an initial act of recovery' of the shorter fiction scattered through newspapers and literary journals and across the timeline of O'Nolan's career. Does it offer consolation for those unwritten masterpieces? Not really, but its editors Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy supply enough curiosities to satisfy the Flann O'Brien aficionado.

The material gathered here is undoubtedly directed more to the scholar of O'Nolan's fiction than to the general reader. Many pieces have already been re-printed in anthologies and in special issues of scholarly journals. But if there is little that is entirely new, there is a great deal that is very useful. And in at least one manuscript variant, as well as the newly translated Irish stories, this interesting collection presents items that otherwise can be fairly difficult to obtain.

A highlight is Jack Fennell's new translation of five Irish stories, four of which were first published in *The Irish Press* in 1932. These were among O'Nolan's earliest publications and were published in a series of twenty Irish articles and stories that he contributed to *The Irish Press* – and its sister publications *The Evening Press* and *The Evening Telegraph and Evening Press* – over the course of a year. It is hardly surprising that a newspaper then so closely associated with Eamon de Valera and the Fianna Fáil party would invite and encourage new Irish-language writers. But what is particularly interesting is how these stories so often make play with the David and Goliath of Anglo-Irish relations, creating comic fantasies of a Gaelic state.

Only one of the stories reprinted here, 'Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!,' was previously republished in its original form – in the selection of stories made by Breandán Ó Conaire for a 1970 issue of *Nua Aois*. Another, 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!,' was previously collected in translation in *Myles Before Myles*, re-issued last year by Lilliput Press. Comparing these two translations of the story makes

for some interesting reading. The choices that Fennell makes lend his prose pace and energy, and the result can give quite a different impression of the source text:

But yer wan over. She lived in the house opposite my own, across the street. 'Annie Laurie' was the first sound I heard as I woke up, and 'Annie Laurie' was the last note that broke my heart and I drifting off to sleep; and the clock chimed Annie-Laurie-Annie-Laurie until morning. 'Gloom follows after glee.' Well, the glee was across the way from dawn to dusk, and it was myself who got the gloom...¹

But the damsel yonder. She lived in the house across the street from my house. Annie Laurie was the first sound I heard on wakening, and Annie Laurie was the last syllable that rent my heart and me going to rest; and the clock said Annie Laurie-Annie Laurie till morning. 'After great diversion comes dejection.' The great diversion was over yonder from dawn till dark, and as I live, it was me who suffered the dejection...²

The five Irish stories included here are sensibly chosen to highlight the correspondences between O'Nolan's early sketches and his mature fiction, the point that is probably of most interest to the scholarly readers of this collection. But this handful of stories should also encourage an appetite for more, and the anglophone reader can only hope that there will indeed be more to come – particularly translations of the first year of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, only a few of which are collected in the original Irish in *The Best of Myles*.

But perhaps the highest virtue of any translation is to create more interest in the original text. Nearly thirty years on, Breandán Ó Conaire's excellent *Myles na Gaeilge* still remains the seminal study of Brian O'Nolan's writing in Irish, though accessible only to readers in that language. It is surely time for a new generation of scholars to begin to catch up on that work and to explore the pressure of Ireland's official languages on each other. Fennell's occasional notes on O'Nolan's wordplay in these stories usefully highlight the linguistic self-consciousness – and inventiveness – that runs throughout the best of his writing. For many of us, such translations provide a necessary entry point to the Irish side of his career. And they should at least encourage a better awareness of it.

But it is in the English material that this collection most directly competes with its predecessors. One obvious point of difference between them is in the editorial approach taken. The earlier collections, directed at a more general market, tended to stay silent about their editorial decisions. Hopper and Murphy wisely correct that

deficiency, though the scholarly conventions followed mean that sometimes their claims of novelty can seem a little overstated. It is made clear, for example, that the version of *Slattery's Sago Saga* presented here is a composite text created by the editors, one based on the typescript of chapters 1, 5, 6, and, 7 held in Boston College and the seven extant chapters published in Claud Cockburn's *Stories and Plays* (1973). Yet although Cockburn is accused of a 'heavy editorial hand,' on close examination there appears to be only very minor differences between their new composite text and Cockburn's earlier version.

There are more obvious rewards in their presentation of 'John Duffy's Brother,' where the editors have again privileged a Boston College typescript over that published in *Story* magazine in 1941 (reproduced in Cockburn's *Stories and Plays*) and the *Irish Digest* original from June 1940. They present good reasons for leapfrogging both published texts, pointing to an elision of a sexual reference in the *Irish Digest* and a smoothing of linguistic idiosyncrasies in the American version. The changes are small but telling, and their scrupulous editorial attention has restored an interesting variant on a classic story.

For those interested in genetic criticism, another point of value in this collection will be the astute inclusion of 'For Ireland Home and Beauty' from the SIUC collection, a 1940 variant of 'The Martyr's Crown' which was published in John Ryan's *Envoy* in 1950. This story of 'the man who was born for Ireland' is a tale in the Keats and Chapman vein, the whole story being an elaborate excuse for its own punchline. Both versions are amusing – are they much more than that? – but more importantly, they provide a useful point of comparison across a decisive decade in O'Nolan's career.

As these examples show, the predominant interest of this collection lies in variant texts rather than new discoveries. There are two first-time reprints of *Irish Digest* stories: 'When I met William of Orange' by Flann O'Brien and 'I'm Telling You no Lie!' by Lir O'Connor. But it is a mistake – albeit a small one – to call 'After Hours' an original reprint; the 1967 source is an excerpt from the 1940 *Bell* article, 'The Trade in Dublin,' and was already published in Stephen Jones's *Flann O'Brien Reader* (1978). As the editors acknowledge, the other English stories collected here were similarly available in other forms.

Yet to have all these under one roof is certainly convenient and as the editors say, it presents 'an invitation to Flanneurs [...] to find their own resonances and significances, not just within and between individual stories but in comparison with the more canonical novels and newspapers columns as well' (ix). There is still unprinted material from *Blather* and *Comhthrom Féinne* which will have its advocates, as will *Cruiskeen Lawn's* smattering of 'Tales from Corkadorky.' But where this collection takes an intriguing leap of faith is in the inclusion of 'Naval Control,' a

science fiction story by 'John Shamus O'Donnell' which was first published in *Amazing Stories Quarterly* in 1932.

It is the collection's translator, Jack Fennell, a researcher of Irish science fiction, who is responsible for this find, which Hopper and Murphy include as a 'speculative gesture.' I feel uncertain about the story's provenance, though on reflection I am uncertain even about Lir O'Connor. I might hedge my bets by guessing that if it is not Brian O'Nolan who is responsible, it might yet be an Ó Nualláin family production. But what *is* certain is that their inclusion of this story is unquestionably the right gesture in the right place. We should have more brave and speculative gestures of that kind.

Otherwise, there is a danger of over-valuing the minor satisfactions of tales like 'Drink and Time in Dublin' or 'Donabate,' which sit incongruously alongside the brilliance of 'John Duffy's Brother' or 'Two in One.' That is the danger of any completist project, and the few bum notes in this timely collection hint at potentially exhausted resources for publishers in the short career of Flann O'Brien. So where should the aficionado go from here? Perhaps it is time to delve deeper into the archives in search of new material, or perhaps instead it is time to move farther away from it. Some of the most speculative – and creative – engagements with Flann O'Brien's legacy in recent years have originated outside academia, such as Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter's musical, *Improbable Frequency*, or John McCloskey's graphic novel of *An Béal Bocht*. This interesting collection reminds us of the need to examine beginnings, to look for correspondences, and to consider the possibility that there might still be new texts to discover. But the limits of Flann O'Brien's short career might also prompt us to look a bit further beyond it, and to consider just where it is that his strange masterpieces have led us.

Notes & references

¹ Brian Ó Nualláin, 'The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!,' trans. Jack Fennell, in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 35.

² Brian Ó Nualláin, 'The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,' trans. Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles Before Myles* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), 174.