

A Graphic Novel

John McCloskey & Breandán Ó Conaire on the Making of *An Béal Bocht*

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Cló Mhaigh Eo recently published a graphic novel version of Myles na gCopaleen's satirical work *An Béal Bocht*. Adapted from the original by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh and edited by Breandán Ó Conaire, author of *Myles na Gaeilge* (1986), the book features the frenetic, playful, and often painfully visceral artwork of John McCloskey. Below, *The Parish Review* speaks with McCloskey and Ó Conaire about the experience.



Jennika Baines: How did you come to decide on making *An Béal Bocht* into a graphic novel? What in particular drew you to this book as a good candidate for this type of work?

John McCloskey: The idea for a graphic novel wasn't originally in the plan. The live action director Tommy Collins was familiar with the book and suggested it might work as an animation. (I make animated films normally not graphic novels – this is the first one!) I hadn't read any of Myles's work at that stage, and to be totally honest the cover of the original book I was given to read didn't instil much expectation or anticipation of the contents. Of course, once I read the book I was inspired, and my preconceptions were blown away. I just loved the unexpected surreal humour and tone within the text and could clearly imagine the scenes translating into animation. I'm not sure of the exact details of what happened next, however Colman met Tommy and saw some of the initial roughs and sketches I had made as mood/tone pieces for an intended animation and the idea of a graphic novel was put forward. Of course, I jumped at the chance to make this graphic novel version.

JB: How did you decide on the visual style of the work?

JMC: From the outset, I wanted to retain some of the feel of the original Ralph Steadman drawings so that was a very general starting point. I did, however, want to attempt to produce something new and vibrant yet retain that scratchy looseness that somehow reflects the tone of the written work. Also, the characters couldn't be too abstract as facial expression *etc.* was vital to sustaining the artwork over the time frame of the novel. I work pretty spontaneously and generally know very quickly if a style is going to fit, and hopefully it works in this case.

JB: What decisions did you make regarding the actual narrative (what to leave in, what to take out), and how did you come to those decisions?

JMC: We had a pretty fluid joint approach and really developed the way of working as we progressed. Initially, I would read through the text and roughly layout pages that I thought would work best visually. Colman would then take these roughs and produce an edited version of the Irish text to match these pages. However, Colman very clearly had the final decision on what text could be left out or indeed needed to be included. There were many times, for example, when Colman would indicate that a certain phrase, action, or piece of text was vital to the written structure so then I would adapt the page accordingly to accommodate the change.

JB: There is a very interesting use of colour throughout the book, but particularly in the use of the English language and in the court scene. Why did you do this?

JMC: Again, a lot of the colour work is spontaneous and instinctive. Some layouts have accidental starting points – perhaps started by a random series of brushstrokes/textures, I deliberately tried to be as loose as possible and go with the flow. In fact, the original

artwork was less structured, but Colman made me put more emphasis on the framing structure and quite rightly so! The use of English barked in the court scenes just gives extra emphasis to the alien nature of the surroundings and people from the confused and bewildered point of view of Bonaparte.

JB: Were you at all influenced by the satirical maps of Ireland that appear in the beginning pages of the first edition of *An Béal Bocht*?

JMC: I think subconsciously the general spirit of the original maps crept into the new artwork, though I didn't specifically try to imitate them. We did however keep the original sketch map of the Sea Cat/Ireland intact and unaltered – it fits pretty well within the fabric.

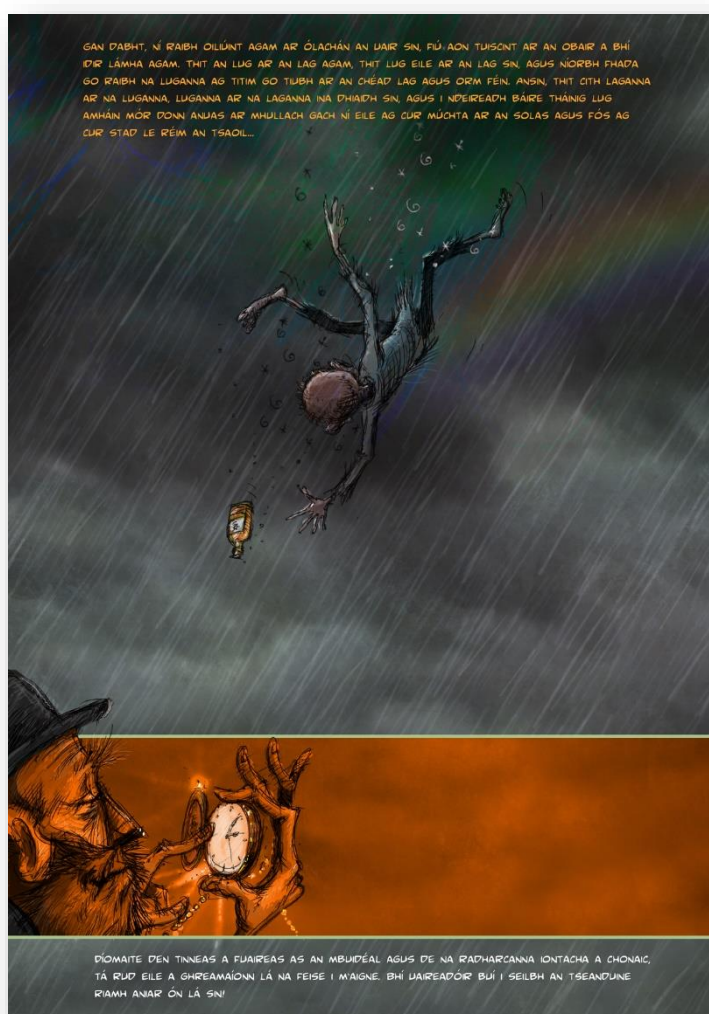
JB: What was the most difficult element of creating this work?

JMC: I really enjoyed the process of creating the book, I suppose the biggest problem as such was adapting the layouts to incorporate Irish text, which is not equivalent to English! The text wasn't totally signed off as we progressed, so this had to be taken into consideration. Also, I suppose, which scenes to emphasise as we all obviously have a subjective view of what's interesting or relevant.

JB: Do you think that any other of Myles, Brian, or Flann's works would lend themselves to such an approach?

JMC: There are a number of works that would lend themselves to this approach, some of the short stories and articles are wonderful little nuggets, surreal vignettes that could be beautifully illustrated – a man made from of the accumulated soil of Ireland anyone?!? There is a rich seam of unreality in mundane situations in Myles's work which I find compelling.

JB: What do you hope readers take away from this book? What do you think this adds to our reading, our experience of this book?



JMC: I hope it draws new readers into the world of Myles, readers who can then seek out the original version to experience in full the extent of the beautiful written art. Hopefully readers familiar with the work will find interest and enjoyment in viewing/re-reading the book from a different perspective and fresh perception.

JB: How much grey paint did you get through?

JMC: 50 shades of course!

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JB: Can you explain how this project came to be and how you became involved in it?

Breandán Ó Conaire: Colmán Ó Raghallaigh, a former student of mine at St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, had established an Irish-language publishing company, Cló Mhaigh Eo, some years after graduating from college. One of his many initiatives involved the production of high-quality graphic 'novels' based on stories from ancient Irish history and mythology. These proved very successful. The idea for *An Béal Bocht*, a work with which he was familiar from his student years, grew out of this project.

JB: What makes *An Béal Bocht* a good choice for a graphic novel?

BÓC: A central feature of the narrative is its imaginative anarchy, anchored in the specific language and referents of the text. The linguistic and distinctive socio-cultural basis of *An Béal Bocht* makes it a very difficult work to render into English, which carries a significantly different ethos, tradition, and personality. A gifted creative artist in another medium – dramatist, musician, or graphic caricaturist – would have an advantage, and the artistic freedom, in re-creating the style, characteristics and essential spirit of the original. John McCloskey's artistry is a good example of such successful cross-over.

JB: What were some of the narrative decisions you needed to make in order to make the book work as a graphic novel?

BÓC: The narrative style of the story lent itself to an appropriate graphic treatment. Considerations of space were the only limiting factor. Thus, for example, Feardanand the Seanchaí's storytelling in Chapter 5 was unfortunately squeezed out. These decisions were made by the publisher/adaptor.

JB: How long has this been in the works?

BÓC: Approximately one year, excluding gestation period.

JB: How important do you think *An Béal Bocht* is in Flann O'Brien's larger body of work?

BÓC: *An Béal Bocht* is an absolutely unique work in Brian O'Nolan/Ó Nualláin's *oeuvre*. It was reportedly his favourite creation, and the one most firmly rooted in Irish traditional and contemporary life, folklore and literature. It received its most discerning English language review – possibly written by himself, or a knowledgeable acquaintance – in *The Irish Times*, 13 December 1941.

JB: What's the reputation of *An Béal Bocht* within literature in Irish?

BÓC: It is generally accepted as a classic of modern Irish literature, with both local and universal relevance.

JB: How do you think this iteration of the novel changes the way people read and understand the story?

BÓC: The deliberate satiric and comedic excess of the original may be more apparent in this version, thereby helping to adjust misconceived notions that, for instance, the Gaeltacht community is the object of ridicule in the book.

JB: What's your favourite scene in the book?

BÓC: Each episode is a carefully constructed singular *vignette*, fashioned from its own particular sources. This was only possible on account of the author's erudition and his impressive awareness and knowledge of these myriad sources.

JB: What do you think Myles would make of this?

BÓC: I believe he would be (discretely) pleased.



For more information, visit: <http://www.leabhar.com/an-beal-bocht.htm>