

# Review

*Brian Ó Nualláin: Eagrán Comórtha Speisialta*, ed. Ian Ó Caoimh, *Comhar* 71, no. 12 (Nollaig 2011), 54 pp., €4.

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‘It is suicide to be abroad,’ confides Mrs Rooney in Beckett’s radio play *All That Fall*, ‘but what is it to be at home, Mr Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution.’<sup>1</sup> The dialectic of home and abroad has been profoundly influential on readings of modern Irish writing. The festivities in honour of your man’s centenary have the brother’s nerves destroyed, amn’t I after telling you, but one thing at least that distinguished individual (or anyone else paying attention) may have gleaned from recent discussions of the life and work of Brian Ó Nualláin is the degree to which that writer complicates the paradigm of stay-at-home conservatism versus globe-trotting experiment. Many early readings of Beckett elided all consideration of his Irishness in favour of a blandly de-particularised internationalism, but while the historicist turn in Beckett studies today threatens to over-adjust the balance in favour of sociological readings centred on the cultural politics of the Irish Free State, the challenge posed by Ó Nualláin takes place on a different level of complication again: namely, that of the Irish language.

‘A lady lecturing recently on the Irish language drew attention to the fact [...] that, while the average English speaker gets along with a mere 400 words, the Irish peasant uses 4,000,’ we read in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. Myles goes on to dispute this ratio, claiming that ‘400/400,000 would be more like it,’ while ‘in Donegal there are native speakers who know so many million words that it is a matter of pride with them never to use the word twice in a life-time.’<sup>2</sup> In Myles’s hands, Dinneen’s dictionary became a weapon of mass befuddlement, hitting ideals of Gaelic purity harder than any amount of *Béarlachas* or rural electrification ever managed. The humblest Irish word becomes an occasion of polysemic proliferation, a centrifuge of manic self-dispersal throwing out *disjecta membra* in all directions, with the mercilessness of the *Cat Mara* chewing on a tasty Rosses lamb. The centre cannot hold, because there is no centre, only a bottomless Bog of Allen of blather where the centre should be.

This much most critics have managed to grasp, but Myles’s exact attitude towards the objects of his satire has been slightly more difficult to pin down. To many,

*An Béal Bocht* is a gleeful demolition job on state-sponsored Irish Irelandism and all its follies, administering kicks in the shins not just to the folklore collectors and the 'fáinne phonies,' but to Peig Sayers, Tomás Ó Criomhthain, and Muiris Ó Súilleabháin too. The reality is more nuanced. As an inspection of the 'Irish and Related Matters' section of *The Best of Myles* is enough to remind us, Myles held *An t-Oileánach* in considerable reverence ('*Níl aon leabhar i mBéarla atá ion-churtha leis*'), but was painfully aware of its recruitment to a state-sponsored ideology of Peasant Quality (to be Revivalist about it). Myles's room to manoeuvre as an Irish-language satirist, however, was narrowly delimited: all books published in the Irish language were (and still are) government-subsidised, and any audience for *An Béal Bocht* would perforce be made up, to a considerable degree, of the very people he had portrayed in such withering terms. The book's reception was suitably fraught, but rather than drain the satirical bile from its author's system, the better to free him up for fictional treatments of the urban-dwelling Gaeilgeoir, it marked not just the beginning but the end of his novelistic career as *Gaeilge*. Happily for Irish-language modernism, along came Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* in 1949, proving there was life in the old tongue yet, but as the Gaelic tide began to go out in the pages of *Cruiskeen Lawn* too, that seemed to be that, where the Gaelic Myles was concerned. One consequence of Myles's 1940s crossing of the Gaelic Rubicon is the amount of material overlooked by his subsequent readers, large swathes of it tantalisingly uncollected to this day. Carol Taaffe's *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* did an excellent job of reconstructing Myles's early Gaelic hinterland, and for those tempted to plunge more deeply in, Breandán Ó Conaire's *Myles na Gaeilge* (1986) is the fruit of an exhaustive archive trawl.

Ó Conaire features prominently in the latest addition to scholarship on the Gaelic Myles, a special issue of *Comhar* with an amusing cover image by that most literary of cartoonists, Tom Mathews. The visual material alone is fascinating, including facsimiles of Irish-language *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns such as '*Smaointe Um Nodlaig*' from Christmas 1943. '*Náireach an scéal é nach bhfuil Santa Claus dúchasach Gaelach againn,*' Myles begins, bewailing the anti-Gaelic bias of those who seek their festive cheer from a Scandinavian impostor. Also unknown to the ancient Gael were the plum pudding and turkey, he hastens to add. Ó Conaire's essay, "'Therapeutic Hilarity" nó Nótaí ar *An Béal Bocht*,' offers an overview of the novel's burlesque humour and a survey of its fate in translation. Its success in Hungarian, Russian, French, Spanish, and Czech suggests that demented Irish-language activists have a more than merely parochial appeal. Nor is this the last we hear of Ó Nualláin in translation: Gülден Hatipoğlu contributes '*Teoiric na Móilíní agus Abar an Aistritheora,*' an essay on the task of rendering *The Third Policeman* into Turkish.

Another variant on the translator's task occurs in Ó Conaire's second essay, 'Ó Nualláin, na Scéalta 'Meán-Ghaeilge' & Sem Seoighe,' in which the Gaeilgeoir preening him or herself for penetrating this far into realms uncharted by mere English-speakers is likely to receive a nasty shock. In a stimulating account of Ó Nualláin's contributions to the 30s journal *Comhthrom Féinne*, Ó Conaire unveils the numerous stories our author contributed to that journal in (to me at least) unreadable Middle Irish. An editorial note accompanying one such tale draws alarmed attention to the prevalence of bawdy material in the dusty pages of Old Irish sagas: 'I have been worried to death,' writes a correspondent from Ballymore Eustace, 'in hiding my edition of the *Táin* and of the *Speckled Book of Durrow* from my youngest son, who is just two years, and chastising him when I find him reading the well-known tenth-century Greek commentary on the Mayo ogham-stones.' Perhaps the correspondent needs a domestic version of the 'Ogham Guard,' to repeat a visual gag from a wartime *Cruiskeen Lawn* column. This leads on to an appraisal of Myles *na Gaeilge* on Joyce, and the verdict (this in 1941, before his later hostility towards Joyce) that the Irish language will not have come of age as a literary medium until it has produced a novelist of comparable sophistication.

In 'An Dlí in Úrscéalta Uí Nualláin,' Orla Ní Chuilleanáin considers the appeal of the law to Ó Nualláin's civil service-trained brain and its metaphorical uses in the face of Irish injustice and absurdity. Regina Uí Chollatáin's contribution focuses on Ciarán Ó Nualláin, the brother of all brothers, and the only person to whom Brian consented to speak Irish in later life. The attacks on Gaelic-tinged extremist parties that mark Myles's wartime journalism gain added savour from the fact that Ciarán was a member of one such group, Craobh na hAiséirighe. It is to Ciarán that we owe the only first-hand account of Brian's youth, in *Óige an Dearthár*, while it was from Ciarán (arguably) that Brian derived the Finn MacCool character in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Ciarán had got there first, in a 1933 mock interview with the legendary hero in *Comhthrom Féinne*).

Moving along, we find an eventful account of last year's centenary celebrations by Ian Ó Caoimh. My own attendance at one of these, the Vienna conference of last July, prompts an unexpected description of my place of work as 'Ollscoil Hull.' The application for bilingual signage to cater for the immiserated Gaels of East Yorkshire is going straight in my internal post. Risteard Ó Glaisne (*nach maireann*) contributes an essay on the Irish-language *œuvre*, and Séamuas Mac Annaidh frames his examination of *An Béal Bocht* with a provocative question: 'An Muidne na Seandaoine Liatha'? I should hope not, but as Mac Annaidh demonstrates, any continued topicality of the book requires the continued existence of 'the *fáinne* phoney' too. While looking forward to the demise of Gaelic false consciousness, his prognosis would suggest that *ní inniu nó*

*amárach a thárlóidh sé sin*, and that 'Idir an dá linn fógraím gur binn Béal Bocht ina thost.' Michael Cronin and Lydia Groszewski bring this Mylesian *feis* to a close with perceptive reviews of Carol Taaffe's aforementioned book and Jennika Baines's essay collection, 'Is it about a bicycle?' *Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*.

Like that Donegal Irish-speaker's vocabulary, the subject of Myles *na Gaeilge* would appear to be inexhaustible. Many of the contributors to this issue of *Comhar* toiled away on it at a time when it was neither popular nor profitable, and as our author continues to come into his own, a Gaelically Gaelic *bualadh bos* for all their efforts is surely in order. *Go maire tú an céad*, runs the traditional Irish birthday salutation, May you live to a hundred. Ó Nualláin/O'Brien/Myles has now reached this landmark in some style, but these insightful and enjoyable essays lay the basis for many re-readings and celebrations to come.

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### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall: A Play for Radio* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (11 January 1941): 8.