

# Report

## *The Flann O'Brien Centenary Symposium*

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 26 June 2011

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In June 2011, a flowering of interest in Flann O'Brien studies blossomed in a most unlikely, and yet oddly familiar (to readers of O'Brien) location: Singapore. Although mentioned in *The Third Policeman* and *Slattery's Sago Saga*, it remains likely that the man himself would have been stunned by a turnout of over one hundred delegates from as far afield as Cork, Dublin, Limerick, and Sligo, as well as Auckland, Leeds, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Prague, and Sydney, and various locations in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, of course. A gathering of such diversity for a Flann O'Brien event would have been impossible to imagine even a decade ago, but his centenary year marked new ground and established, finally, the fact that the work is no longer just discussed along the pub-route from Fleet Street to Grafton Street, Dublin. In Singapore intense discussions of apparently 'marginal' works like 'John Duffy's Brother,' *Faustus Kelly*, and 'Scenes in a Novel,' were commonplace, as were continued excavations of the two masterpieces, *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*.

*The Flann O'Brien Centenary Symposium* (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) was held on 26 June 2011, on the occasion of Brian O'Nolan's centenary year. The symposium was a special featured part of a larger international conference, titled *The Contemporary: An International Conference of Literature and the Arts* (24–26 June 2011), in acknowledgement of the immense influence of O'Nolan's work on postmodernism, *avant-garde* fiction, metafiction, and fiction in general. The event itself was focused around an extended panel comprising papers by Keith Hopper (*Oxford and the Centre for Irish Studies at St Mary's University College*), Ondřej Pilný (*Charles University, Prague*), and Neil Murphy (*NTU, Singapore*), while Daniel Jernigan (*NTU, Singapore*) was the official responder. Hopper's keynote address, "'Truth is an odd number": Flann O'Brien in his Centenary Year,' formed the centrepiece of the event – a detailed update on Flann O'Brien studies that considered various shifts in critical emphasis in recent years. Pilný's paper, "'Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?": Flann O'Brien and 'pataphysics,' offered a reading of *The Third Policeman* against the

backdrop of Alfred Jarry's concept of pataphysics. Pilný argued that O'Brien's novel shared the exuberant inventiveness and the intellectual boundlessness of Jarry's pataphysical creations. Murphy's paper, 'Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life*: The Limits of the Real,' suggested that *The Hard Life*'s relative failure in the O'Nolan canon was linked to the author's abandonment of the exuberant metafictional impulse.

The discussion segment was a lively session involving extended discussions and numerous questions from the audience, which included the noted postmodernism scholars, Prof. Brian McHale (*Ohio State University*) and Prof. Brian Richardson (*University of Maryland*), as well as Prof. Ron Schleifer (*University of Oklahoma*), Prof. Emeritus Shirley Chew (*Leeds University*), and Prof. Reed Dasenbrock (*University of Hawaii*). The range of questions and viewpoints offered by these guests of the conference, among those of other attendees, confirmed the current status of Flann O'Brien as a major author whose work is situated in many critical traditions (postmodernism, the novel, Irish studies, narrative theory). One common position seemed to emerge; a quite general acknowledgement that *The Third Policeman*, rather than *At Swim-Two-Birds*, now forms the main centre of Flann O'Brien studies.

A direct outcome of this event, and the composition of the panel of speakers; of Hopper, Murphy, and Pilný being flung together for several days and nights of chatter is that several projects were hatched. They have since collaborated on a special issue of *Litteraria Pragensia*, dedicated to 'Neglected Irish Writers' (forthcoming end March, 2013), a subject discussed at great length during and after the symposium, while Hopper and Murphy found added impetus to proceed with their long-planned collection of *Flann O'Brien's Short Fiction* (forthcoming Dalkey Archive Press, 2013). Daniel Jernigan, buoyed by the depth of interest in O'Brien's plays at the event has since completed his *Flann O'Brien: Collected Plays and Teleplays* (forthcoming Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

*The symposium was co-organised by the Division of English (School of Humanities & Social Sciences, NTU) & the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS), NTU, Singapore, and received additional financial support from the Embassy of Ireland, Singapore.*

