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## Myles na gCopaleen's 'Column Bawn' in the *Sunday Dispatch*: Some Archaeological Notes

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An investigation into Myles na gCopaleen's uncollected 'Column Bawn' in the *Sunday Dispatch* in 1952.

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In the early 1950s, Brian O’Nolan, under the name of Myles na gCopaleen, wrote a regular column called ‘Column Bawn’ in the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch*. He mentions this column occasionally in his correspondence, and his biographers and commentators advert to it as well, but in all cases these references go without any actual hard data to shore up their intelligences. There are certainly no listings for these columns to be found in any of the current Flann O’Brien/Myles na gCopaleen/Brian O’Nolan bibliographies. But there are, nonetheless, two different—and quite probably both incomplete—sets of these pieces in existence, representing two different stages of the life of the column.

The *Sunday Dispatch* was a British weekly newspaper, originally published as the *Weekly Dispatch* on 27 September 1801, and renamed as the *Sunday Dispatch* in 1928, before being merged into the *Sunday Express* in June 1961. Although the official edition of record was published out of London, it had a Northern edition, published out of their Manchester office, which also produced an Irish edition. The British Library, as a legal deposit library, was sent a copy of each issue of the paper, but this only applied to the original London edition, meaning that it is unlikely that there is an officially archived collection of the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch* anywhere in the world. This raises almost insurmountable barriers to those who wish even to record their existence, let alone to read what was written. But there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

O’Nolan mentions working for the *Sunday Dispatch* on occasion. In October 1955, he writes to London literary agents Stephen Aske and AS Knight about the possibility of writing Sexton Blake stories:

My qualifications, briefly, are: M.A. degree; author of novel publ. Longman’s, London, and in the U.S.; author of many short stories published here and in the U.S., and included in anthologies. I have been writing a sarcastic column for the *Irish Times* here for about 16 years, have written a lot for the *Sunday Dispatch* and French papers. I regard myself as an accomplished literary handyman.<sup>1</sup>

There is at least a grain of truth in each of O’Nolan’s claims here. *At Swim-Two-Birds* had been published in limited numbers by Longman’s, London, in 1939, and the novel was

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<sup>1</sup> Flann O’Brien *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 198–9. O’Nolan’s application to write for the series never came to anything, so there is not a brace of Sexton Blake sample chapters out there waiting to be found; at least, as far as anyone knows... See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 198–201; John Wyse Jackson, ‘The Mysteries of Flann O’Brien,’ *The Spectator* (30 January 1988): 31; and Pádraig Ó Méalóid, ‘The Cardinal and the Corpse: A Flanntasy in Several Parts,’ *gorse* 3 (March 2015): 218–37.

published in the US when Pantheon Books produced an edition in 1951. It is, however, something of a stretch to say that O’Nolan was the author of ‘many’ short stories, let alone to imply that he had a large quantity published Stateside. He had about fifteen or sixteen pieces of short fiction published over the course of twenty-two years, and about a third of these were published in the Irish language in the *Irish Press* between 1932–3, and remained untranslated into English until the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Still, we do at least know that three stories penned by O’Nolan were published in the US: ‘John Duffy’s Brother’ (in 1941 and 1943),<sup>3</sup> ‘Drink and Time in Dublin’ (in 1952),<sup>4</sup> and ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ (in 1955).<sup>5</sup> It is, of course, true that he had written a column for *The Irish Times*, however I have found only one reliable record in support of his claim of having written for French papers: a letter to O’Nolan, dated 2 June 1955, from Jacques Vidal Lablanche, the editor-in-chief of *France Dimanche*, a French weekly celebrity news magazine.<sup>6</sup> Lablanche informs O’Nolan that they have transferred 20,000 French francs<sup>7</sup> to his Irish bank account for the purchase of the story ‘Deux en un,’ a translation of ‘Two in One,’ which had originally been published in *The Bell* in July 1954.<sup>8</sup> Seeing as O’Nolan was writing to the London agents Aske and Knight in October 1955, it looks like the ink was, at that time, virtually still wet on his only verifiable French short story publication. Yet the most tantalising – and heretofore largely under-explored – detail here is O’Nolan’s claim to have ‘written a lot’ for the *Sunday Dispatch*.

To investigate whether copies of the *Sunday Dispatch* columns could still be found, I searched established newspaper archives and the collections of O’Nolan’s work held

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<sup>2</sup> The stories ‘Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliain 2032!’ (‘Revenge on the English in the Year 2032!’), ‘Teacht Agus Imtheacht Sheáin Bhuidhe’ (‘The Arrival and Departure of John Bull’), ‘Eachta an Fhir Ólta: CEOL!’ (‘The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!’), ‘Mion-Tuairimí ár Sinnsir’ (‘The Reckonings of our Ancestors’), ‘Aistear Pheadair Dhuibh’ (‘The Tale of Black Peter’) are translated from the Irish by Jack Fennell in *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 23–45.

<sup>3</sup> Flann O’Brien, ‘John Duffy’s Brother,’ *Story: The Magazine of the Short Story* 19, no. 90 (July–August 1941): 65–68; Flann O’Brien, ‘John Duffy’s Brother,’ in *Two Bottles of Relish: A Book of Strange and Unusual Stories*, ed. Whit Burnett (New York: Dial Press, 1943), 237–46. ‘John Duffy’s Brother’ was also published in *19 Tales of Terror*, ed. Whit Burnett and Hallie Burnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1957), 184–88; but this was subsequent to O’Nolan’s letter to Aske and Knight, so does not actually count, here.

<sup>4</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, ‘Drink and Time in Dublin,’ in *1000 Years of Irish Prose*, ed. Vivian Mercier & David H Greene (New York: Devin-Adair, 1952), 509–15.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ in *44 Irish Short Stories: An Anthology of Irish Short Fiction from Yeats to Frank O’Connor*, ed. Devin A. Garrity (New York: Devin-Adair, 1955), 359–64.

<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, *Collected Letters*, 193 n.92.

<sup>7</sup> The equivalent of about £20 at the time, which converts to about £500 today.

<sup>8</sup> Myles na Gopaleen, ‘Two in One,’ *The Bell* 19, no. 8 (July 1954): 30–34.

in American university libraries. The British Library currently only has archives of the original London edition of the *Sunday Dispatch*,<sup>9</sup> and extensive searching online through the catalogues of all the major national and university libraries has failed to turn up any copies of any of the local variants of the paper elsewhere. The *Sunday Dispatch* was not exactly a journal of record, it seems. It was, none the less, the paper that first published Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*, serialising it in the Irish edition in September and October 1956, as well as publishing several other Irish writers, amongst them former *Irish Times* alumnus Patrick Campbell.<sup>10</sup> Despite these notable contributions, even the regular edition of the *Sunday Dispatch* was difficult to find listed anywhere outside the British Library. Where, then, was I likely to find this ghost paper, and O'Nolan's columns from it? The answer lay elsewhere.

There are three principal collections of Brian O'Nolan's papers and belongings, all of them in America: one in Southern Illinois University Carbondale's Morris Library, located at their Special Collections Research Center in Carbondale, Illinois; one at University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas; and one at Boston College's John J. Burns Library in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Of these, the collection in Boston is by far the largest, at 23 boxes or 14 linear feet – more than twice the size of the other two combined – followed by Carbondale, who have 11 boxes or 3.08 linear feet, with Austin having the smallest collection, with only two boxes.

The Burns Library collection was purchased in 1997 from Brian O'Nolan's brother, Michéal Ó Nualláin, who had assembled it following the death of Evelyn McDonnell Ó Nualláin in 1995. It currently has a 25-page online finding aid,<sup>11</sup> which replaced a previous, in some respects more detailed, 37-page online document. The current finding aid, and the proper citation, for the 'Column Bawn' columns is:

An Cruiskeen Lawn, scrapbooks, 1949 March–1952 October, Box 20, Flann O'Brien papers, MS.1997.027, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

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<sup>9</sup> Since October 2020, the British Library have been archiving the *Weekly Dispatch* and the *Sunday Dispatch* in their online archive, the British Newspaper Archive. This does not, at least for the moment, include any of the provincial variations, nor is there any current indication that they intend to do these. See [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/weekly-dispatch-london](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/weekly-dispatch-london).

<sup>10</sup> When told that Patrick Campbell had left *The Irish Times* to go write for the *Sunday Dispatch*, Robert Maire 'Bertie' Smyllie (editor of *The Irish Times* from 1934 until his death in 1954) remarked: '*The Sunday Dispatch* is a shuddering awful newspaper. The thought of a member of *The Irish Times* working for it pollutes my mind.' Dermot James, *From the Margins to the Centre: A History of The Irish Times* (Dublin: The Woodfield Press, 2008), 109.

<sup>11</sup> <https://library.bc.edu/finding-aids/MS1997-027-finding-aid.pdf>.

However, I want to also mention the description from the previous, now defunct, 37-page finding aid, as this actually mentions the columns in question. Its listing for Box 19 says:

Large ledger, 15 1/2" × 10 1/4" × 1 3/4", signed by author. Grey-green cover with light brown spine and corners. This contains 102 pages of Cruiskeen Lawn cuttings (204 page surfaces). This includes 32 pages of cuttings of the Column Bawn from the Sunday Dispatch c. 1951–1952.<sup>12</sup>

There is also a collection of 'Column Bawn' related material in Carbondale collection. This comprises 71 typed pages, containing just over 16,000 words, and appears to be sixteen separate columns, of which nine are columns that already exist as cuttings in the Burns Collection in Boston collection, with the rest being either columns unique to this collection, or else being unrelated pieces.

I wrote to the Burns library in October 2015, asking them for scans of 'Column Bawn' cuttings they had in their collection.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, I had in my hands copies of a little-known and never-republished Myles na gCopaleen column. It was really very exciting. What was quite a bit less exciting, though, was the writing itself, it has to be said. But, I told myself, this was to be expected, in a way, as the period they were from, the early 1950s, was a tricky time in O'Nolan's own life. Describing the 'Column Bawn' columns in *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, Anthony Cronin notes: 'In the mid-1950s also, he wrote for a short while in the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch*, re-cycling, broadening and largely emasculating *Cruiskeen Lawn* pieces to suit the presumed taste of a less sophisticated audience.'<sup>14</sup>

Now that I had scans of the columns, I wanted to see if I could sort them into any sort of chronological order. Whilst O'Nolan cut and pasted these columns into his scrapbook,<sup>15</sup> he was not otherwise his own best archivist. The columns are mostly pasted in two to a page, in no apparent order. There are 61 columns in all, some of which are dated, but most of which are not. 37 columns are undated, with only 24 being dated, we must assume, correctly. In fact, only two of those 24 columns were cut from the paper

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<sup>12</sup> To avoid any confusion, let me state that the 'Column Bawn' column cuttings are on 32 page surfaces, or 16 double-page spreads, to borrow a term from the world of comics.

<sup>13</sup> 'I see you have cuttings from his Column Bawn from the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch* – whilst there are archives of the *Sunday Dispatch* in the British Library, there doesn't seem to be a physical archive anywhere of the *Irish* edition of that paper, meaning that it's entirely possible that the columns you have in the ledger at 19/9 could be the only extant collection of these columns anywhere in the world.' Pádraig Ó Méalóid, email to Burns Library, Boston College (October 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 187.

<sup>15</sup> It is possible the cuttings were scrapbooked by his wife, Evelyn, whom he had married in 1948 and who was the sole executrix of his estate following his death, but I cannot help thinking she might have brought a bit more order to proceedings.

in such a way that they also include the paper's own title and date printed in the top right-hand corner, as positive proof of when and where they came from, being those dated 5 and 12 October 1952. Subsequent checking in the British Library's Newspaper Room, before the Covid pandemic restricted travel, yielded only one microfilm record for those dates, that of 12 October 1952.<sup>16</sup> I now had proof that there really were different versions of the paper, something I had previously only had on faith, and evidence that the column ran in only one of those versions, rather than all of them.

One further goal was to figure out, from the limited amount of data to hand, the start and finish dates of the column's run. An unusually helpful handwritten note beside the column for 5 October 1952 reads: '*Ar na chríochnú timpeall Oct 1952*' (finished around October 1952). The last dated column, that for 26 October 1952, would appear to have been the final instalment of 'Column Bawn' – if we can believe that note – as the 26<sup>th</sup> was the last Sunday in October. It was difficult, but not impossible, to accurately pin down the start date, too, even though there is not a specifically dated column for it. There is an undated column that begins thus:

Well—how do you do?

Surprised to see me here? So am I.

The first man I want to talk about is Andy Clarkin. He has been for many years a sort of side-kick to Sean MacEntee, though secretly harbouring illicit personal ambitions of his own.

The main, roaring ambition was realised last week – Andy became Lord Mayor of Dublin. [...]

I am bold enough to give Lord Mayor Clarkin one important tip. As Dublin's first citizen, he must forthwith cease from defacing and defaming one of the city's main streets.

I mean Pearse-street. It is there his Lordship carries on a coal business in premises from which project a public clock. Four months ago, the clock stopped at the hour of 12.58.

I cannot record whether a.m. or p.m., as I never buy my coals in the middle of the night nor in the forenoon.

That clock should be fixed.

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<sup>16</sup> The British Library's British Newspaper Archive have been digitising their collection of back issues of *Weekly Dispatch* and *Sunday Dispatch*, beginning in October 2020. Although they have by now scanned all the old issues, these are still only the standard London edition and, except for double-checking to see that the issue for 5 October 1952 does not contain the 'Column Bawn' of that date, this is really a research cul-de-sac. Nonetheless, it is here: [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/weekly-dispatch-london](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/weekly-dispatch-london).

Several things are apparent from this column. First, this is obviously Myles introducing himself to a new audience ('Well—how do you do?', 'The first man I want to talk about is') so I think it is safe to suggest that this is his first column. Secondly, this is essentially the same line as he took in his long series of ACCISS ('Andy Clarkin's Clock Is Still Stopped') pieces in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in *The Irish Times*, around the same time, where he hounded Mr Clarkin for probably far too long about his stopped clock. Thirdly, he gives us a helpful clue to the date of the column, by alluding to Andy Clarkin becoming Lord Mayor of Dublin. As reported on the front page of *The Irish Times* of Tuesday 26 June 1951, Andrew Sylvester Clarkin became Lord Mayor of Dublin on 25 June 1951, which was a Monday. The first dated 'Column Bawn' instalment in the Burns collection is from 15 July 1951, so presumably this first column must date from before then, but also from after 25 June, when Clarkin ascended to his Lord Mayoralty. This leaves us with precisely two possible dates: 1 and 8 July. So, we need to examine Myles's phrasing here more closely. When he says that 'The main, roaring ambition was realised last week,' which date is this more likely to have been published upon? Sunday 1 July was only six days after Monday 25 June, meaning it is unlikely, if he was writing his first column in the middle of the week, that he would refer to the Monday of that week as being 'last week,' so the balance of probability is that the first 'Column Bawn' column in the Irish edition of *Sunday Dispatch* was published on 8 July 1951, and the last one on 26 October 1952. Including those two dates, that's a total of 69 Sundays altogether. Boston College sent me scans of 61 columns, and there is currently no way to verify if that is all there was, or if there are a few more columns out there, waiting to be discovered.

A possible clue to the demise of the column can be found in the 1986 book *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin*, where Breandán Ó Conaire writes:

*Deirtear go mbíodh roinnt de na hailt scheachtainiúla a scríobhadh sé sna caogaidí don eagrán Éireannach den Sunday Dispatch—The Column Bawn—go mbídís siúd I nGaeilge aige freisin.<sup>17</sup>*

(It is said that some of the weekly articles that he wrote in the fifties for the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch* – The Column Bawn – were in Irish too.)

This speculation is partly corroborated by Jack White,<sup>18</sup> who writes in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*:

<sup>17</sup> Breandán Ó Conaire, *Myles na Gaeilge: Lámhleabhar ar shaothar Gaeilge Bhrian Ó Nualláin* (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar, 1986), 50.

<sup>18</sup> Jack White joined *The Irish Times* in 1942, where he was the London editor from 1946–52 and features and literary editor from 1952–61, before leaving to work for RTÉ in 1961.

And for about two years in the Fifties, he wrote a weekly column for the Irish edition of the *Sunday Dispatch*: as Myles na Gopaleen,<sup>19</sup> of course, since the *Dispatch* was interested in buying the name. A colleague who worked in the Manchester office, which was responsible for the Irish edition, recalls that the feature was dropped because he began to send in copy in Irish. Copy was often late anyway, turning up on Saturday instead of Thursday, and nobody had time by then to go out and seek for a translation. Not surprisingly, the Northern Editor refused to take a chance on publishing copy that nobody in the office could understand. There is a strange perversity, in this context, about his stubborn refusal to go back to writing Irish for *The Irish Times*.<sup>20</sup>

That same year, 1952, Myles had taken a long break from writing *Cruiskeen Lawn* in *The Irish Times*, from 22 February until 9 December.<sup>21</sup> When he did return, he had very slightly changed his name from Myles na gCopaleen to Myles na Gopaleen, eschewing the gC at the start of gCopaleen for a more prosaic, and less lovely, capital G.<sup>22</sup> White speculates that:

The change to Myles na Gopaleen was made [...] after he had begun to gain some celebrity outside Ireland, in deference to the Anglo-Saxon epiglottis. We in *The Irish Times* cherished the pedantry of the eclipsis in the genitive, but he had his way.<sup>23</sup>

Myles even adverted to the change in the first column he wrote after his long absence:

My name? Oh, that? There's nothing to that at all. We must move with the times. The old version 'na gCopaleen' was all right ten or twelve years ago, but we had to get the thing re-styled for 1953, my jubilee year. The new GOPALEEN no doubt looks very simple and modern and steam-lined (*stet*), but I can tell you that making the change was no joke. It involved problems in nuclear fusion and the installation at the Santry laboratories of a wash-basin having but one tap, marked HEAVY WATER. We had to call in the Nobleman out of Trinity and, believe me or believe me not (across my heart if I had one), GOPALEEN is the detritus resulting from the bombardment of NA gCOPALEEN with deadly gamma rays.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The 'Column Bawn' pieces all appeared under the name Myles na gCopaleen, not Myles na Gopaleen.

<sup>20</sup> Jack White, 'Myles, Flann, and Brian,' in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe (London: Martin, Brian & O'Keeffe, 1973), 72–3.

<sup>21</sup> See Catherine O. Ahearn, "'Where you bin, bud?': Myles na gCopaleen's Disappearing Act,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 101, 109–10.

<sup>22</sup> Myles na Gopaleen, 'The Return,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (9 December 1952): 4.

<sup>23</sup> White, 'Myles, Flann, and Brian,' 63, fn.

<sup>24</sup> na Gopaleen, 'The Return,' 4.



After I delivered a version of this paper on a panel at *Palimpsests*, the Fifth International Flann O'Brien Conference, hosted by University College Dublin in July 2019, another of the attendees told me that he had heard a different explanation for the change in the name. Apparently O'Nolan had sworn that he would never write the column for *The Irish Times* again. But real-world pressures, such as the need for the money, prevailed, and Myles was forced to return. However, by changing the name under which the column was published, the pretence that it was a different writer, wafer-thin a pretence though it might be, could be maintained. Whether this is true or not I have no way of knowing, particularly after *The Irish Times* destroyed all its historic correspondence when they moved in October 2006 from their original premises on D'Olier Street to new premises on Tara Street. However, it certainly has the ring of something he would have done.

I think that the change from na gCopaleen to na Gopaleen marked a change in the writer himself. Certainly, his last pieces under the name 'na gCopaleen,' which ran in the *Sunday Dispatch* until October 1952 (the last *Irish Times* column to use this spelling was published in February 1952) were a pallid version of when he had first used it, twelve years earlier in 1940. I cannot help but feel that he wanted to break away from *The Irish Times* but was eventually left with no choice but to return.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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