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A Distasteful Milieu: Brian O'Nolan and the Civil Service, 1935–51

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This article examines what Brian O'Nolan described as the 'distasteful' milieu of the civil service, contextualising O'Nolan's career as a civil servant that paralleled his career as a writer. The civil service and officialdom are a growing presence in his writings, especially in *Cruiskeen Lawn* where Myles na gCopaleen speaks on behalf of the increasingly bitter civil servant, Brian O'Nolan.

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In 1964, Brian O’Nolan made brief mention of his civil service career in a ‘preliminary personal note’ on his proposal to write a history of Irish Whiskey distilling for the Irish Distillers Group:

After considerable University studies, which included experience abroad, I joined the Irish Civil Service in 1935. I resigned in 1953, with the rank of Principal Officer, having found the milieu increasingly distasteful. It was bad enough that nearly all Ministers were either peasants or uneducated shop boys (to some of whom I acted as Private Secretary) but there was undisguised graft, jobbery, and corrupt practices large and small.¹

As inappropriate as such vehemence might be in this context, O’Nolan’s diatribe reflects the growing presence of the civil service and officialdom in his writings. In *The Dalkey Archive*, for example, Michael Shaughnessy, introduces himself to De Selby by saying ‘I am a lowly civil servant, I detest the job, its low atmosphere and the scruff who are my companions in the office.’² Similarly, in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column for *The Irish Times*, Myles na gCopaleen frequently spoke on behalf of the increasingly bitter civil servant, Brian O’Nolan. This article argues, however, that despite his disregard for its ‘low atmosphere,’ the civil service was a very accommodating milieu for writers such as O’Nolan and that, by breaching well-known boundaries, he was in fact the author of his own misfortunes.

A 1945 *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, written when O’Nolan was ten years in the civil service, shows signs of impatience at his lack of advancement. In a hilariously convoluted review of a programme note for Micheál MacLiammóir’s stage version of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Myles considers the aesthetics problem of those ‘chronically incapable of appreciating a thing in terms of itself.’ He finishes the column with the sneer that ‘[n]o Irish farmer appreciates his young strapping son for the attractive healthy agricultural type he is (and must intrinsically remain). The Irish farmer sees his son as a potential Higher Executive Officer, Grade II, Temporary, Unestablished, full of grievances about bonus.’³ There is considerable condescension in the ‘must intrinsically remain.’ The intrinsically bourgeois O’Nolan could not see the value to an Irish farmer of seeing his son going to work in a clean suit, to a job where his hands remained clean, with regular pay and holidays, and a pension at the end. Where recruitment in the respectable lower middle-class positions in the banks, insurance

¹ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1989), 312.

² Flann O’Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (London: 4th Estate, 2016), 12.

³ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (7 March 1943): 3.

houses, and larger business concerns such as Guinness was still through sectarian influences and patronage, the civil service was one of few careers open to educated young men and women, of all denominations, with no social connections or wealth.

The Civil Service of the Irish Free State

In 1933, just before O’Nolan’s entry to the civil service, a commission of inquiry chaired by Joseph Brennan of the Department of Finance offered the bland assurance that the newly independent state continued with the civil service inherited from the former British regime.⁴ We may assume that Brennan was expressing the core value the civil service attached to continuity and ‘business as usual,’ where advocating change was implicitly a criticism of the actions and policies of previous officials. However, in truth the transition from British to native rule was marked by considerable tension between Sinn Féin’s demand for new institutional structures and the byzantine structures of inherited civil service of the British regime. This tension led to a significant number of resignations and dismissals. Many of those who resigned did so to take advantage of the generous severance terms of the Treaty of 1921 and the Constitution of 1922. The new government dismissed those it considered unreliable or simply no longer required as it took over the old regime and established new departments to serve the independent state. The loss of civil servants due to retirements and dismissals, especially from the senior posts, opened up new vistas of opportunity and promotion as lower ranking clerks in their thirties were invited to apply for promotion to the most senior departmental grades. Former clerical or executive officers soared to the highest civil service grades, where they would remain for the next twenty and more years. There was also pressure for reinstatement and rewards from those civil servants whose nationalist opinions led to their dismissal in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. The election of the 1932 Fianna Fáil government generated a new wave of tension, and opportunity.⁵

O’Nolan entered the civil service just as the tide of promotions was ebbing. The government of the Irish Free State, determined to avoid any accusation of jobbery, transferred responsibility for assessing applicants to the civil service to an apolitical Civil Service Commission to ensure meritocratic entry. A similar non-political procedure ensured promotion by proven ability within the civil service structure. In practice, promotion depended on assuring senior civil servants that the values and practices of officialdom were respected and had been internalised by the candidate. O’Nolan was of the generation that came to adulthood in the new independent Ireland, and had to

⁴ Department of Finance, Commission of Inquiry into the Civil Service (Brennan Commission) Report, 1932-4.

⁵ Martin Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland, 1912-38: 'Shaking the Blood-Stained Hand of Mr Collins'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 201-25.

come to terms with the unheroic reality of post-revolutionary Ireland whilst working under the direction of the ageing generation of the revolution who were to remain in power up to the 1960s.

The Administrative Officer

In 1935, O’Nolan successfully competed for entry to the Administrative Officer (AO) grade in the civil service. Created in 1925, the AO grade was conceived as the entry grade for those destined as future heads of department. Qualification for the position was an Honours level university degree, with a general knowledge test and oral Irish interviews. The usual practice, though not followed in O’Nolan’s case, was to train up the new AOs in the Department of Finance, where they absorbed the Finance attitude of a scrupulous parsimony, before being sent out to the other Departments. The first intake included John Garvin, Leon O’Broin, and Maurice Moynihan who were to have stellar careers in the service. The AO was a managerial level post in which the officer was expected to engage with the formation of policy, the revision of existing practice, current regulations, or decisions in the light of changing circumstance, and also to engage with the organisation and direction of the business of government. E.P. McCarron, the Secretary of the Department of Local Government, in his evidence to the Brennan Commission on the civil service, complained that the AO staff were never given early or sufficient responsibility and soon lost drive and commitment.

The close links between the Oxbridge colleges and the elite ranks of the civil service that are a feature of the British system were not established in the Irish civil service, despite the efforts of the National University of Ireland and Trinity College Dublin. Graduate entrants to the AO grade had to compete for promotion with eager and able candidates from the lower clerical and executive grades who had the advantage of years of assimilation to the culture of the civil service. The absence of an easy entry to top level appointments may have fed the resentment of O’Nolan and his fellow graduates. Consequently, for later entrants such as O’Nolan, there were scant promotional opportunities due to the relative youth of the higher Principal Officers and Departmental General Secretaries. Where there were opportunities, success depended on the opinion held of the candidate within the Establishment Division of the Department of Finance. The overly elaborate grading system of the civil service had more to do with discipline than with the varying levels of responsibility at each grade. A poor disciplinary record could condemn a civil servant to a static career in the same grade. Many civil servants’ careers were blighted by frustrated ambition and a numbing sense of stasis. O’Nolan expressed his frustrated ambition in the acid commentary of an increasingly bitter Myles na gCopaleen, a commentary that was closely monitored and recorded by Finance.

The first training that the new AO received was in acquiring fluency in the jargon and officialese of the civil service. H.P. Boland OBE, Establishment Officer in the Department of Finance, advised the new intake of AOs to study the London *Times* editorials for style in writing. The language of the civil service was to be respectful, formal, and even formulaic. Written in the style of the late Victorian era, it was lampooned in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. It was learned by the AO as they drafted memos which were then passed up to the Principal Officer who would amend and edit. It might then pass further up to the Departmental General Secretary, who may further amend and edit before sending it back down. The importance lay not in the content, which may be trivial, but in the form. The objective was to address only procedures and processes without ever addressing questions of reason. Under the 1924 Ministers and Secretaries Act, which still shapes the civil service, the Minister is the department expressed as 'corporation sole.'⁶ Civil servants did not make decisions, nor did they offer opinion to the public, only to the Minister. The language of the civil service pretended that everything done was by direct instruction of the Minister: 'I am instructed by The Minister to inform you that he cannot see his way to granting your request...' Invariably colourless, stripped of personality, the civil servant learns how to be the scrivener, realising he cannot be the speaker.

The Department of Local Government and Public Health

O'Nolan was posted to the Department of Local Government and Public Health for no other reason than because the department needed an AO and he, a recent recruit, was available. It was purely expedient and was, for O'Nolan, to prove an unhappy choice, though in his supervising Principal Officer John Garvin he shared an interest in modern literature, most particularly in the works of James Joyce. O'Nolan's whole career was spent in the headquarters of the department in the Custom House on the Dublin Quays. Local Government and Public Health was one of the biggest of the government departments.⁷ In 1947, it was divided into three separate departments of Local Government, Health, and Social Welfare with O'Nolan remaining in the original department. In 1931, its staff was 174 men and 74 women serving in the 19 different sections. It was the Department that negotiated the relationship between the local and central government, a brief that imposed a staggering burden on one administrative unit. It was required to facilitate and control spending on

⁶ 'Ministers and Secretaries Act, 1924: Section 2,' Irish Statute Book, accessed 9 May 2022, <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1924/act/16/section/2/enacted/en/html#sec2>.

⁷ For a history of the department, see Mary E. Daly, *The Buffer State: The Historical Roots of the Department of the Environment* (Dublin: IPA, 1997).

roads, housing, street lighting, health services, social welfare services, libraries, graveyards, water and sewage schemes; to regulate abattoirs; to supervise and license institutions for the insane; to manage elections at all levels and maintain the various electoral registrars. During the Emergency years of the Second World War, it was primarily focused on keeping the train system running and in the provision of turf as fuel to replace coal.

The independent state inherited from the previous British regime a deep suspicion of local politicians and the department saw itself as engaged in an unending battle against vested local interests. The British government had encouraged a multi-layered local government system for Ireland, based on the counties, as a distraction from the political demand for national government. It is arguable that Ireland had an excess of local government and that a wider regional focus would have been more useful. The governments of the Irish Free State favoured a non-political and technocratic local government system, thus strengthening the centralising tendency. The Local Appointments Commission, established in 1926, took the appointment of staff out of the control of the local authorities. The government was very active in the suppression of recalcitrant or spendthrift urban corporations and county councils. The 1930 City Management Act and the 1940 County Management Act established a salaried professional manager, appointed by and reporting to the Minister for Local Government, for all local authorities.

The Departmental view was that spending on long term developments that were of national importance was preferable to short term and purely localised spending. But local political priorities demanded that giving out jobs on local works with high labour input, such as road repairs, should eclipse environmental improvements. Public works were, in other words, historically a form of unemployment relief. The local objective was to maximise the number of unskilled local men employed on digging a roadside drainage scheme or resurfacing a road. Politics and bureaucratic power at the local level counted for more than a modern national road network, clean water, or an efficient waste system. Local government remained important however, and survived, as the power base for aspiring national politicians.

O’Nolan was posted to the Finance, Local Loans, Grants, and Surcharges Section. This was the section that sanctioned loans for local authorities’ investment in waterworks and sewerage schemes. ‘Sanctioning’ required close attention to costings, quotations, contracts, and the monitoring of expenditure. It generated a constant and unending stream of files coming from every corner of the country, each requiring examination and noting before being sent on for further examination and noting. It is easy to imagine the huge disruption caused by one official sitting on a file, or losing

it, or simply ignoring it, as, Anthony Cronin notes, O'Nolan was wont to do in his last years as a civil servant.⁸

The Irish Language and the Civil Service

The revolutionary activists that created the independent Irish state were mobilised initially by the cultural movement for an 'Irish-Ireland,' seeing themselves primarily as cultural rather than political activists. The Irish language was deployed by cultural activists as the signifier of national separatism from England and Englishness. There was a determination in the newly independent state to assert a distinct Irish cultural identity, in a state-sponsored drive to revive the Irish language as the spoken language of the people. Schools were initially championed as the engine in the revival of Irish, but the civil service was also to be Gaelicised. The civil service was therefore both a legacy of the British system in its over-elaborate grading structures and also a site for de-Anglicisation and Gaelicisation.⁹

For the Junior AO entry, by which O'Nolan came into the civil service, 200 of the 900 total marks were assigned to the Irish oral and written exams. Opportunities for advancement in the civil service were subject to Irish written and oral exams, thereby compelling the inherited civil service of the previous regime to learn Irish, if they wished for promotion. Civil servants were also subject to regular five yearly exams in Irish. A pass was necessary to receive due increments in pay. From 1925, new entrants to the armed forces, the Garda Síochana (police force), and the civil service were required to possess some knowledge of the Irish language, the level of fluency dependent on the grade. The departments of state were all given Irish titles, as were the titles of ministers. Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance 1923–32, in all other areas of fiscal policy deeply conservative, was the most enthusiastic promoter of an Irish-speaking civil service. Civil servants were expected to use the Irish form of their names. In official correspondence, the opening greeting (*A Chara*) and the final signing off (*Mise le meas*) were to be in Irish, as were the dates and also the addresses and titles of departments. Blythe was undeterred by internal government files going astray as clerical staff misunderstood the unfamiliar Irish form of the addresses and titles of departments. Blythe composed a long and detailed memorandum for the civil service typists (most of whom had left school at age 14) explaining the transformations in the names of the month wrought by the genitive case (November in Irish is *Samhain* but in the genitive form, the 5th of November, becomes *5ú Mí na Samhna*) and listing the

⁸ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 256–8.

⁹ Joseph Brooker, 'Estopped by Grand Playsaunce: Flann O'Brien's Post-Colonial Lore,' *Journal of Law and Society* 31, no.1 (March 2004): 15–37.

correct genitive form of each month along with the correct Irish-language form of the title of each department and grade within the civil service.¹⁰

Spoken Irish, *Caint na nDaoine* (the speech of the people) featured a variety of regional dialects and uncertain grammar. It was a purely oral tradition as formal schooling in literacy was exclusively in English. The dominant dialect was that of Munster, with that of Connemara acceptable, and that of Ulster (which O’Nolan spoke) considered a patois.¹¹ Following the policy of Gaelicisation, the decision was made to create an official state form of Irish, *an Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, as a standard and approved form of Irish spelling and grammar. This was first adopted by the civil service in 1945. It was a colourless and flat form of Irish, suitable for memos but not really reflective of the speech of the people which was florid and colourful. It was lampooned in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column where the put-upon but patient narrator is engaged in Irish conversation by the familiar Dublin ‘character’ (a halting and impoverished Irish written in English phonetics) and replies in a fluent and poetic mode (all written in correct and grammatical Irish and presented in Irish uncial font).¹²

The results of the drive to Gaelicise the civil service were disappointing. By the end of the 1950s, by which time a generation of civil servants had served the independent state, only 14% were described as fluent in Irish with 50% described as possessing ‘some ability’ in reading and writing in Irish. However, in reality only 2% of civil service business was being carried out in Irish.¹³ The ideology of the State and its practices did not match. The outcome was to give absolute preference in all civil service and local government appointments to those with Irish, which meant less qualified candidates having fluency in Irish were appointed, breeding cynicism about the language revival. The Irish language became a tool for personal promotion, rather than a means of communication between the state and the people, and a target for invective from Myles na gCopaleen who often joked about those ‘who spoke Irish when it was neither popular nor profitable.’¹⁴

A further arm of the Gaelicisation policy was the designation of areas as *Gaeltachtaí*, that is areas where Irish was the everyday language of the people. In June 1928, regulations required that all local government appointments in Gaeltacht areas must

¹⁰ National Archives Ireland, Department of Finance, E1/28/29.

¹¹ Philip O’Leary, ‘The Irish Renaissance, 1880–1940: Literature in Irish,’ in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature, Volume II: 1890–2000*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 234–9.

¹² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (13 May 1943): 3.

¹³ National Archives Ireland, Dept of the Taoiseach, TSCH/3/S14740E ‘civil service and local authority employees: qualifications in Irish; proficiency in Irish language. June 1954–April 1960.’

¹⁴ See Germán Asensio Peral, ‘Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and the Politics of Revival,’ *Nordic Irish Studies* 15, no. 2 (2016): 133–48.

be able to conduct their business in Irish, with three years grace offered to achieve standard. The time limit was pushed out again and again to avoid the chaos of mass dismissals of doctors, nurses, midwives, and rent collectors. An Act of 1929 provided grants for improved housing for Irish speaking families in the Gaeltacht, leading to 12,000 applications. This required the dispatch of an army of inspectors to ensure that the applicants were indeed habitual speakers of Irish.

The Irish government also established several bodies to publish materials and conduct scholarly research on the Irish language and tradition. An Gúm (the scheme) was established in 1925 to publish books and educational resources in the Irish language, though in its early years it mainly published translations of English-language classics. An Cumann Béaloideas na hÉireann (Irish Folklore Commission), established in 1935 to study and collect the folklore and traditions of the people, sent out collectors to record a tradition that was seen to be in terminal decline. The Irish Manuscripts Commission was established in 1928 to further the study of manuscript and archival collections relevant to the history of Ireland by publishing scholarly editions. An Coimisiún Logainmneacha (The Placenames Commission), established in 1946, was required to advise the government and the Ordnance Survey on the Irish form of the names of places, reversing the Anglicisation of the landscape and topography by the nineteenth-century cartographers. The Institute for Advanced Studies, a pet project of Éamon de Valera's, was established in 1940 to carry out fundamental research in theoretical physics, cosmic physics, and Celtic studies. These were all state sponsored and state funded initiatives. They all provided material for ridicule in the *Cruiskeen Lawn* at one time or another. An Gúm was described as worthless and the revised 1927 edition of Dinneen's Irish-English dictionary *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* that included dialect and loan words was mocked endlessly.¹⁵ This mockery was not forgotten. In 1943, O'Nolan applied to move to the broadcasting division of the Department of Posts and Telegraph that ran Radio Éireann, then emerging as a haven for intellectuals and artists within the civil service. His attempt to get into broadcasting failed.¹⁶ Myles na gCopaleen went further and attacked these government inspired and funded institutions as incompetent and lazy, run by pedants mired in obfuscations. It may have been an unconscious expression perhaps of his own frustrated ambition for an academic career, but it was also dangerous for a civil servant to attack a state body.

The cultural revivalists encouraged a new creative writing tradition that was realist, focused on the lived tradition, and was located on the western seaboard, the Gaeltachtaí.

¹⁵ Brendán Ó Conaire, 'Brian Ó Nualláin/O'Nolan: Scholarly Background & Foreground,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 5–22.

¹⁶ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 196–7.

Best exemplified by the Blasket writers, this tradition featured autobiographical accounts of what was thought to be an authentic and heroic folklife untouched by modernity or Anglicisation. The more critical writers were ignored, such as Máirtín O Cadhain who, in his fantasy *Cré na Cille* published in 1949, creates a world in which the dead in the graveyard continue uninterrupted their previous life of petty spite, backbiting, and jealous feuding. There were many Irish language *Cruiskeen Lawn* items in the early years. But, in time, O’Nolan had largely ceased to write in Irish, reflecting perhaps his opposition to the narrowly obsessive world of the Irish language lobby as portrayed in the *Feis* episode in *An Béal Bocht*. O’Nolan’s view was that ‘a knowledge of Irish does not necessarily connote adherence to the social, cultural, or political philosophies of another Irish speaker.’¹⁷ O’Nolan, as Myles and as Flann O’Brien, was incensed by the suggestion that there was an authenticity in the Irish speaking culture of the west that was absent in English-speaking Ireland.¹⁸ He believed that Irish writing is defined by recognising that it could only be written by someone Irish, even if in English. This position contradicted the dogmatism of what he termed the ‘fainne wearing, sunburst brigade.’¹⁹

Many traditionalists retained absurd notions on the innate purity of the folk and could be enthusiastic supporters of censorship when sex appeared, as was evident in the response to Eric Cross and his publication of *The Tailor and Ansty* in 1942.²⁰ O’Nolan’s rage, channelled through Myles na gCopaleen, was also fuelled by the hypocrisy of governments and politicians that refused to acknowledge that the problem of the Gaeltacht that ought be addressed was not language but poverty, and that squalor was not an admirable cultural marker.²¹

Private Secretary to The Minister

In 1937, on the recommendation of his supervising officer John Garvin, O’Nolan was appointed to the role of Private Secretary to the Minister.²² The recommendation, so soon after his entry to the civil service, indicates he was making a mark and was on his way up. This was a position in which civil servants could show their ability and impress. A successful stint as Private Secretary would mark out an AO for promotion. The role

¹⁷ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 160–1; 170–3.

¹⁸ Jonathan Ó Néill, “‘Erse-Atz & Gaelassenheit’ What can we learn from Ó Nuairín’s use of Irish?,” *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 14–21.

¹⁹ Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 102–6.

²⁰ *Seanad Éireann debates*, vol.27, no.1 (18 Nov. 1942).

²¹ Máirín Nic Eoin, ‘Contemporary Prose and Drama in Irish: 1940–2000,’ in Kelleher and O’Leary (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature volume II*, 272.

²² Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 106.

of the Private Secretary is a difficult tightrope to walk as it requires supporting the Minister in relation to departmental work and also constituency work, whilst avoiding being too deeply involved in politics. The relationship between a Minister and his Private Secretary was based on trust. He was expected to have a keen insight into the political relationships between his Minister and his party and government colleagues. He was at the side of the Minister all the time, keeping an eye on the diary, arranging events and meetings, acting as gatekeeper, recognising who must be given access to the minister and who must be deflected, thus ensuring a smooth flow through the days and weeks. Duties included attending with the Minister at the Dáil. For O'Nolan, who carried a reputation as a brilliant student debater, the Dáil debates were most likely dull and interminable.

A successful Private Secretary developed a very personal relationship with the Minister by displaying tact and discretion, but also had to have an eye on the higher civil servants in the department and ensure that their paths were equally smoothed. Ministers may come and go but the Secretary General can make or break a civil service career and a successful Private Secretary would be expected to pass on intelligence to his departmental General Secretary. That O'Nolan served three ministers of Local government as their Private Secretary indicates that he succeeded in impressing them. His civil service career however signals that he was less successful in impressing his senior civil servants. He first served Sean T. O'Kelly, Minister from March 1932 to September 1939. Dublin-born O'Kelly was the son of a shoemaker, so perhaps one of the 'uneducated shop boys' that O'Nolan later derided in his 'preliminary personal note' to the Irish Distillers Group. O'Kelly was an enthusiastic Gaelic Leaguer, which may have recommended to him the Irish-speaking O'Nolan. He was a founder member of Fianna Fáil and editor of the party newspaper *The Nation*. O'Kelly was fifty years of age when he became a Minister in 1932. He was highly aware of the appalling slum problem in Dublin city and as Minister he oversaw a major house-building programme that consolidated working class support for the Fianna Fáil party. Suspicious of rural local councils he was a strong supporter of managerial local government, although he was not without clientelist tendencies. He shared a fondness for whiskey with his Private Secretary.²³

Brian O'Nolan continued as Private Secretary to Patrick (Paddy) Ruttledge who served briefly as Minister from September 1939 to August 1941. Ruttledge was a Trinity College Dublin graduate and a solicitor and not therefore an uneducated shop boy but perhaps, as he was from Ballina County Mayo, could be considered a 'peasant'

²³ Patrick Maume, 'O'Kelly, Seán Thomas (Ó Ceallagh, Seán Tomás)', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, available at: www.dib.ie

by O’Nolan. A founder member of Fianna Fáil he served briefly as Minister for Local Government and Public Health before he resigned due to ill-health.²⁴

He was succeeded in August 1941 as Minister by Seán MacEntee, a former IRA brigade commander and also a founder member of the Fianna Fáil party. MacEntee had to respond to the demands made on the department by the Emergency, which included maintaining a supply of turf as fuel, setting up an ARP (air raid protection) service, running emergency centres, and preparing local government for the possibility of invasion, whilst providing a skeleton public transport service. This was a time when bicycles were the only reliable mode of transport and Dublin police were being overwhelmed by the theft of bicycles and bicycle parts, a recurring trope in *The Third Policeman*.

Assistant Principal Officer in charge of the Planning Section.

In March 1943, O’Nolan was appointed Assistant Principal Officer in charge of the Planning Section in the Department, bringing him into the policy-making level within the Department and in daily contact with MacEntee. John Garvin was instrumental in securing the promotion, hoping perhaps the more demanding work would steady O’Nolan. Cronin is not correct in believing that the section dealt with planning appeals to the Minister against local authority refusals for buildings as that planning system only became effective after the 1963 Planning Act.²⁵ There had been a brief flowering of urban planning in Dublin City after the First World War, influenced by the Garden City Movement. The Department of Local Government initiated the Town and Regional Planning Act of 1934, as amended in 1939. This was permissive legislation that enabled local authorities to ‘make provision for the orderly and progressive development’ of cities and towns, but did not oblige them to make a plan. In fact, the legislation was ignored.²⁶ By 1952, only 17 of the 27 county councils had adopted the Act. Planning was associated with ‘cranks’ who advocated technocratic solutions to social problems and, with continued population decline, seemed pointless. However, during the war, planning became essential and, by the post-war period ‘planning’ had become the key to the future as exemplified by the Beveridge Report in Great Britain.²⁷ Planning was seen as offering technical and engineering solutions to problems rather than as a social or economic activity. The Planning Section of the Department, as established in 1946, had no influence on government decisions nor on local actions. In fact, the

²⁴ Marie Coleman, ‘Ruttledge, Patrick Joseph (Paddy, P.J.)’, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, available at: www.dib.ie

²⁵ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 252.

²⁶ Number 22 of 1934, Town and Regional Planning Act (1934).

²⁷ Michael J. Bannon, ‘Forty Years of Irish Urban Planning-An Overview’, *Journal of Irish Urban Studies* 3, no. 1 (2004): 1–16.

Department remained sceptical of the value of planning and failed to take the lead in the programme of post-war planning. Following the establishment of the October 1942 cabinet committee on post-war planning (that excluded MacEntee), the Department of Industry and Commerce under Seán Lemass emerged as the leading department shaping post-war Ireland.²⁸ So, while O'Nolan was there, the Planning Section was a quiet backwater within the Custom House.

MacEntee was well-read and cultivated but politically a staunch conservative and opposed to government provision of social services.²⁹ MacEntee's attacks on his opponents were long-winded and vicious, and it was felt in Fianna Fáil that MacEntee's tongue cost them the 1948 election. His intemperate language often echoes that of his Private Secretary, and now Assistant Principal Officer, in his Myles na gCopaleen persona. O'Nolan was used by MacEntee on occasions as his speech writer. There are striking correspondences between the coruscating language of MacEntee and Myles na gCopaleen and is it not unreasonable to assume that O'Nolan strayed beyond the boundaries of civil service/political relations in his doings with MacEntee.³⁰ Later, when O'Nolan felt aggrieved at the pension he was awarded, he wrote a long, personal, and plaintive letter to MacEntee seeking his help.³¹ Echoing MacEntee's denunciation of state provided social services, the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column of 6 December 1943 carried a pointed attack on the enthusiasm for what Myles termed the 'planning malady,' through the Royal Irish Academy of the Post War World, formed to produce the Planned Man.³² Both MacEntee and Myles shared a contempt for the jargon of the planners that deflected informed and critical evaluation. The National Planning Exhibition in the Mansion House, part of the 1944 National Planning Conference, was not merely lampooned but condemned by Myles as 'a ramp.' Myles offered further his 'considered view that Paud keeping step with world hysteria in the belief that he is being "modern" is a woeful spectacle, is nowise funny.'³³ Myles was correct in saying Dublin was a slum, and that planning is a nonsense in a country with a collapsing population, but O'Nolan the Acting Principal Officer was venturing onto thin ice in publishing what were his own opinions just as planning was becoming a political rather than a technical matter. MacEntee strongly supported O'Nolan when Finance tried to block his promotion to Acting Principal Officer in 1946, at a time when Finance was increasingly unhappy at

²⁸ Tom Feeney, *Seán MacEntee: A Political Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 133–5.

²⁹ Deirdre McMahon, 'MacEntee, Seán (John) Francis,' *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, available at: www.dib.ie.

³⁰ Feeney, *Seán MacEntee: A Political Life*, 164–5.

³¹ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 172–6.

³² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (6 December 1943): 3

³³ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (10 May 1944): 3. Qtd in Steven Curran, "Could Paddy Leave Off Copying Just for Five Minutes": Brian O'Nolan and Éire's Beveridge Plan,' *Irish University Review* 31, no.2 (2001): 363.

his journalism (the identity of Myles na gCopaleen was now generally known within the civil service) and also his faltering attendance record.³⁴ As MacEntee shared his reactionary views on social legislation, and expressed the same exaggerated fears of the totalitarian implications of welfare, O’Nolan could enjoy his protection from censure, so long as MacEntee remained Minister.

The Dismissal of Brian O’Nolan

It is generally assumed that it is easier to sack the Pope than to sack a civil servant. But where a civil servant crosses a Minister, sacking can be swift and brutal. Edward Patrick McCarron, despite having loyally served the Castle regime before independence, was controversially appointed the secretary of the new Department of Local Government and Public Health in 1922. Highly regarded by all, he was nonetheless dismissed without warning and with immediate effect by Seán T. O’Kelly in November 1936 as the minister ‘could no longer have complete confidence in his discretion and also his lack of appreciation of government policy.’³⁵ Tom Barrington, the Establishment Officer in Local Government, worked under H.P. Boland OBE, the secretary of the Establishment Division in the Department of Finance. By 1946, O’Nolan was being reported by Barrington to Boland and notes were being kept of his absences and also his newspaper column.

Discipline across all departments was an ongoing irritant to the Establishment Division in the Department of Finance. It was the case that discipline was difficult to enforce in the civil service. The lack of mobility and slow promotions created a closed system with a club atmosphere. Departmental heads avoided confrontation with staff with whom they had worked for many years and often would ensure that failing staff (often due to alcoholism) were accommodated by diverting them away from posts where they could pose problems. O’Nolan complained to Garvin that he, as a friend and head of department, did not look after him.³⁶ But it would be wrong to suppose that the civil service was a cold place for creative writers, as can be seen from the following list of just a few who enjoyed public success as writers while serving as civil servants.

Richard Power.

Denis Devlin.

Thomas Kinsella.

Denis O’Driscoll.

³⁴ O’Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 150–1; Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 168–70.

³⁵ Brendan O’Donoghue, ‘McCarron, Edward Patrick,’ *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, available at: www.dib.ie

³⁶ O’Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 163–9.

Roibéard O'Faracháin.
 Francis McNamara.
 Padraic Fallon.
 Seán Ó Riordáin.
 Máirtín Ó Direáin.
 Joseph O'Neill.
 Mervyn Wall.
 Valentine Iremonger.
 Donal Ryan.
 Leo Cullen.
 Máire Mhac an tSaoi.

Nor should it be assumed that a civil servant could not publicly criticise a government. León Ó Broin, when writing in Irish, could poke fun at the pieties of Irish politics and deal with darker themes of Irish society.³⁷ Charles Kelly (father of the actor Frank Kelly, who played Fr Jack Hackett in the *Father Ted* series) had a long and successful career in the civil service whilst editing the satirical magazine *Dublin Opinion* from 1922 to its final edition in 1967. He was also the resident cartoonist 'CEK' who threw a satirical, and often critical eye, on the government and civil service. In an earlier confrontation with the Department of Finance about his *Cruiskeen Lawn* comments O'Nolan made specific reference to Charles Kelly and his overt political commentary.³⁸ MacEntee attacked Kelly in the Dáil after a CEK cartoon campaign was credited with defeating the Fianna Fáil attempt to abolish Proportional Representation in 1959.³⁹ Kelly, unlike O'Nolan, could disarm his critics in the Establishment Division by fulsome apologies and promises to be more careful in future.

Hanging over every civil servant who wanted to offer an opinion in public was Finance Circular 21/32 'Civil Servants and Politics.' The Finance Circular directed that

an official shall not make any verbal statements in public (or which are liable to be published) and shall not contribute to newspapers or other publications any letters or articles, conveying information, comment or criticism on any matter of current political interest, or which concerns the political action or position of the Government or of any member or group of members of the Oireachtas.⁴⁰

³⁷ O'Leary, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1880–1940,' 247.

³⁸ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 150–1.

³⁹ Anne Dolan, 'Kelly, Charles,' *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, available at: www.dib.ie

⁴⁰ 'Circular 21/1932: Civil Servants and Politics,' The Government of Ireland, 2 June 1932, accessed 9 May 2022, <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/677df113eafb42ea95d74722097b4934/>

All civil servants were required, on appointment, to read this notice and affirm that they understand and accept it.

Myles na gCopaleen had become more intemperate, and less witty, in *Cruiskeen Lawn* of the later 1940s and early 1950s, as the tone of the column developed from satire to polemic. O’Nolan was also becoming more intemperate in his internal criticism of the civil service, much of it justified but not delivered in the officialese required. Invited in 1944, as all at his grade would be, to comment on the proposed expansion of the pension scheme to the employees of local authorities, he launched into a bitter tirade against the unjust, cynical, and immoral civil service system that used the threat of loss of pension to ensure docility and a progressive emasculation on the part of its servants. O’Nolan had realised that the byzantine grading system of the civil service was an instrument for imposing disciplinary control. He accused the state, having enrolled the country’s intellectuals into the civil service, of debasing and dehumanising them.⁴¹ In a 1951 column, he attacked the proposed Arts Bill, naming and insulting the TDs who spoke on the debate including Con Lehane, Thomas Derrig, and Éamon de Valera (who, Myles assures us, rarely speaks on art).⁴²

O’Nolan’s nemesis, or release, came in the person of Patrick Smith, Minister for Local Government in the Fianna Fáil government of 1951–4. Patrick Smith was a farmer from County Cavan who left school at age 14 to work the land. He was, at the age of 19, the youngest Officer Commanding in the IRA during the War of Independence. Captured and sentenced to death by military court, he survived due to the July 1921 Ceasefire. Although he never had participated in the political side of the republican movement, he was a founder member of Fianna Fáil and spent the rest of his career as a TD for Cavan constituency. Truculent, blunt, utterly parochial, Smith was always a farmer, happiest as Minister for Agriculture. Eventually, he was to resign from government in 1964 in protest at what he thought was Lemass’s soft line on trade union strike actions.

In 1953, Myles na Gopaleen began running a derogatory series of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns on the government’s An Tóstal celebration, an attempt to boost tourism and generally promote optimism.⁴³ This was again a civil servant taking the opportunity to make caustic commentary on government policy, seeing ‘its streets and towns taken over by the scruff and sweepings of Britain and America.’⁴⁴ In the 5 February 1953 column, he offered a colourful description of a Dublin Corporation ‘shaymus’ struggling to respond to a typical Mylesian witty wordplay: ‘The great jaw would drop,

⁴¹ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 222–7.

⁴² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (27 April 1951): 6.

⁴³ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (27 January–7 February 1953).

⁴⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (7 February 1953): 8.

the ruined graveyard of tombstone teeth would be revealed, the eyes would roll, and the malt-eroded voice would say "HAH?".⁴⁵

Everyone could see that this was not any recognisable member of Dublin Corporation, but that it was in fact the Minister Smith. Garvin, now Secretary General of the Department, was summoned to receive Smith's order that O'Nolan was to go, and immediately. If O'Nolan was dismissed, he would lose all his accumulated pension earnings.

Garvin was relieved that O'Nolan was ready to go and accepted the offer of voluntary retirement on medical grounds. He had no difficulty in securing the required medical certificate stating that 'he is incapable from infirmity of mind or body to discharge the duties of his situation and that such infirmity is likely to be permanent' and have it accepted by the Department of Finance. O'Nolan ceased to be a civil servant on 5 February 1953. He expected to be pensioned on his current Principal Officer salary but as that was an 'Acting' post he in fact went out on his last substantive position of Assistant Principal Officer. With 18 years, 7 months, and 21 days of service, that gave him a lump sum of £707/15/4 and an annual pension of £265/8/3 p.a.⁴⁶ Richard Power, author of *The Hungry Grass*, a novel published in 1969 on the emotional and cultural hunger of contemporary Ireland, took over his desk.

⁴⁵ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (5 February 1953): 4.

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 176-7.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

