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In Memoriam: John O'Brien

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Obituary of Dalkey Archive Press publisher John O'Brien.

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John O'Brien was an Irish-American from Chicago. His love of contemporary literature led to his founding *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1981, a publication which gave critical coverage to books which were not being written about in the mainstream reviews or book pages. The Dalkey Archive Press, which published 'the sort of books he liked' (as he called them) was its natural successor. The name of the publishing house reveals John's ever-present sense of humour and his love of irony, as well proving his credentials as a fully paid-up Flanneur. Naturally, the Dalkey Archive Press's list features all the major works of Flann O'Brien as well as several compilations and critical studies.¹

TIME Magazine recognised the Dalkey Archive Press as 'a major force on the global literary scene.'² In 2011, John was given the Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Book Critics Award in New York. In 2015, he was appointed a *Chevalier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* at a ceremony at the French Ambassador's Residence in Dublin. The ambassador, Jean Pierre Thébault, stated that that Dalkey Archive Press had published more French authors in translation – 53 – than any other English-language press.

Born in 1945, John died at home in Illinois on 21 November 2020, having lived with serious heart and lung trouble for some years. Alas, he was one of those people who found the lure of tobacco irresistible, while only too aware of the damage it was causing. His default position at most social gatherings was outside, smoking. Nevertheless, he managed to achieve his ambition of publishing over a thousand books.³ It was a great relief to him that he had recently come to an agreement with his former colleague, Chad Post of Deep Vellum Books of Dallas, Texas that would secure the future of his unique list.⁴

John O'Brien will be much missed in his adoptive home, Dublin. He was a quietly spoken man, initially low-key to the point of self-effacement, but conversation with him soon revealed an impressive knowledge of the neglected greats of contemporary fiction, a tenacious argumentative streak, a sharp sense of irony, and a great capacity for friendship.

¹ Complete List of Dalkey Archive Press titles: <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/download-complete-list-of-dalkey-archive-titles/>.

² *TIME Magazine* (20 March 2006).

³ As he believed when I spoke to him on Zoom in May 2020 – one of his obituaries says it was only 850.

⁴ This is a link to a curated list of 31 titles currently for sale through Deep Vellum, benefitting independent US book-sellers: <https://bookshop.org/shop/dalkeyarchive>.

My Friendship with O'Brien

I first met John in 2003 when he came to Kinsale to meet my husband, the writer Aidan Higgins. I last spoke to him during a long one-to-one Zoom meeting in May 2020, as part of my research for a memoir I was writing about Aidan, who died in December 2015. JOB, as his friends referred to him among ourselves, was at his home in Illinois, and at his most relaxed – feet up, beer in hand, cigarette nearby, happy to recall a long and mostly warm friendship.

I have my own reasons to be grateful to John. I had a collection of stories, *The Dogs of Inishere*, looking for a publisher in the UK, but not having published any fiction for almost 30 years, after a year it was still waiting to be read by an editor, any editor... Several people had suggested that I offer it to Dalkey, but I was reluctant to ask a friend for a favour. Finally, I overcame my scruples, and John understood my predicament immediately: 'Send it on as an attachment. I won't read it myself, I'll give it to one of the people in the office [in Victoria, Texas], and they can decide if it's right for us. I'll get back to you within three weeks.' Luckily for me, whoever read it liked it and decided it qualified as 'a Dalkey Archive book.' *The Dogs of Inishere* was published in 2017. It was edited, very lightly, by the anonymous enthusiast in Victoria, Texas, and nicely produced. I was paid the usual small advance. I had no complaints.

The Dogs of Inishere came out in the 'Irish Literature Series,' which included fiction by contemporaries Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Christine Dwyer-Hickey, and the critic Eileen Battersby, coincidentally improving the gender balance of DAP's Irish list. Eileen was a close friend of John's for most of 2015–16. They had long, almost daily phone conversations about books and writing, both being passionate advocates for the same kind of book. But he refused to edit her novel, *Teethmarks on My Tongue* (2016), insisting that it did not need editing. As a first-time novelist, Eileen thought it did. Unfortunately, that soured the friendship, which was a great pity. When Eileen died in a car accident in December 2018, John was devastated, like all her friends.

In addition to finally meeting Aidan, John's 2003 trip to Ireland was also the first time he had visited Dalkey, having named his publishing house after the Flann O'Brien novel rather than the place, and he was pleasantly surprised to find an attractive seaside village with a Boho vibe.

The Dalkey Archive Press

John started *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* while he was teaching at Illinois Benedictine College. It was printed in typescript which gave it a raffish air reminiscent of samizdat publications. Three years later there was money in hand, because *The Review* had no overheads, and John decided to reprint a few books of the sort that *The*

Review was championing, books that would never have got back into print through a commercial house. He explained:

The Press was never quite planned; I more or less backed into it, because there is no way that any reasonable person could start such a press with the expectation that it would last. *The Review* whet the appetite for the books being discussed in its pages, which could then be purchased from the growing list.⁵

CONTEXT, a free literary tabloid edited by John and distributed by independent booksellers and progressive academics, also spread the word among avid readers about Dalkey's new titles. It was sponsored by the Lila-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund. It was a winning formula. The Dalkey Archive Press was supported initially by funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lannan Foundation. Eventually the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana became the main backer. In 2006, it was succeeded by the University of Houston-Victoria.

From the start, John's list was dominated by his own personal taste for a strand of fiction that could be called avant-garde, but that he preferred to describe as 'subversive.' Naturally, Flann O'Brien featured large, alongside the likes of Anne Carson, Gilbert Sorrentino, William Gaddis, and Brigid Brophy. Other Irish writers whose work was reprinted include Dermot Healy, Dorothy Nelson, Desmond Hogan, Ralph Cusack, Alf MacLochlainn, Brian Lynch, and Eimar O'Duffy.

The availability of grants and government subsidies (French especially), which John was very good at sourcing, led to works in translation forming a significant part of the Press's output. Its extensive list now includes many translated works, from Svetlana Alexievich of Belarus (who went on to win the Nobel Prize in 2015), Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, the Serbian David Albahari ('a Kafka for our times'), the veteran Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, the Norwegian writer Kjersti Skomsvold, and a more recent enthusiasm of John's, the Romanian Dumitru Tsepeneag, to name but a few.⁶

The two strands – subversive and international – came together in the Press's anthology, *Best European Fiction*, a large volume which appeared annually from 2010 to 2018 and was essential reading for writers on both sides of the Atlantic, myself included. I reviewed it in the *Irish Examiner* most years and greatly enjoyed the annual challenge of summarising the highlights of this unpredictable cornucopia of new writing for the general reader in 600 words.

⁵ 'An Interview with John O'Brien,' *Dalkey Archive Press* (2004): <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-john-obrien/>.

⁶ Browse the list online at <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/download-complete-list-of-dalkey-archive-titles/>.

The Dalkey Archive Press in Dublin

With the many European authors on his list, and ever more time spent travelling in Europe, it made sense by the early 21st-century for John to be based on this side of the Atlantic. He tried London, but when he discovered that he qualified for an Irish passport, which greatly pleased him, he moved his base to Dublin, where he felt more at home. He took to wearing a tasteful Donegal tweed jacket and cap and was often to be seen in the finer restaurants of Dublin's Georgian quarter, especially the Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud. Publishing subversive literature did not rule out enjoying the better things in life.

The expense of hotel accommodation in Dublin led to John's decision to rent an elegant mews house in Fitzwilliam Lane, one of the best addresses in town, midway between St Stephen's Green and Merrion Square. This residence served as accommodation and office space for John and his assistants, as well as a stop-over for visiting writers. While a merger with the Translation Department of Trinity College Dublin was under discussion, the Press also had a showroom in Trinity's Fenian Street outpost. John tried country life for a while too, renting a large home in Wicklow and bringing his beloved dogs, including Higgins and Dickens, over. The final move was to a more practical base in Raglan Lane, Ballsbridge.

I was one of many people who helped John to find his way around literary Dublin. If I was coming up from my home in Kinsale for a book launch, I made a point of inviting him along and introducing him to whomever I knew. He was always reluctant to go to the launches and once suggested we cut the launch altogether and go straight out to dinner. When I asked why, he explained that he found the social interactions of people at Dublin book launches thoroughly mystifying: 'I can never work out if you're talking to someone you've known all your life, or someone you've just met. I don't know what all the chat has got to do with the book that's being launched, there's no food, and the wine is usually terrible.'

He was used to a more structured world, where the book in question would be presented in a formal context, with a seated audience and a serious discussion, followed by a spread of tempting finger food and perhaps one glass of good wine, while people continued to talk about the book. Subsequent Dalkey Archive events, often held in the Trinity Hub, became known for the lavish buffets and good wine that accompanied them.

O'Brien and O'Brien

John's commitment to publishing the work of Flann O'Brien was thorough. In addition to the five novels and *The Best of Myles*, Dalkey Archive published several other books by or about Flann O'Brien, including *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, edited

by Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper and *Flann O'Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, edited by Daniel Jernigan (2013) – both featuring translations from the Irish by Jack Fennell (2013) –, as well as *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, edited by Maebh Long (2018).⁷ Republications of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns collected in *The Best of Myles* (1999) and *Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn* (2000), both with a preface by Kevin Nolan, as well as the late John Wyse Jackson's *At War* (2004), opened up Myles na gCopaleen's *Irish Times* work to new and diverse audiences. Dalkey also furthered scholarly engagements with Flann by publishing critical monographs such as Thomas C. Foster's edited work *A Casebook on Flann O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds* (2004), Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja's *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, and Georges Perec* (2007), and Flore Coulouma's *Diglossia and the Linguistic Turn: Flann O'Brien's Philosophy of Language* (2015).

Maebh Long, a leading authority on Flann's work, comments:

John O'Brien played an important role in widening access to Brian O'Nolan's output. His involvement in reissues of the novels and of the *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns meant that the brilliance of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen was always available to new readers. His commitment to publishing material previously reachable only through archival trips or access to back issues of old journals and magazines opened up a wide array of writing to readers and scholars.⁸

Healy and Higgins

Back in 1983, John featured Aidan's work extensively in a special edition of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* that did much to enhance Aidan's reputation, especially in the US. John had already produced a handsome edition of Aidan's short story collection, *Flotsam & Jetsam* (2002), before they finally met face to face.⁹ The business side had been handled by Aidan's agent, Jonathan Williams.

⁷ Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1993); Flann O'Brien, *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1994); Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick C. Power (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1996); Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, intro. William H. Gass (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998); Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1999); Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. Kevin O Nolan (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1999); Flann O'Brien, *Further Cuttings from Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. Kevin O Nolan (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2000); Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien at War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940-1945*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2004); Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, ed. and intro. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013); Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013); Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018).

⁸ In interview with the author.

⁹ Aidan Higgins, *Flotsam & Jetsam* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002).

Aidan had initially been published by John Calder, another pioneering independent publisher with an impressive list, headed by Samuel Beckett's prose works, but he had since moved on to Secker & Warburg in the hope that the money would be better. But Aidan was increasingly uneasy with Secker, a company that had been taken over, or 'gobbled up,' as he put it, several times since his signing, by ever-larger conglomerates. He was keen to meet John, an independent publisher outside the commercial loop (or 'a donor-supported, non-profit publisher,' as it is labelled in the US) who was talking of reissuing the entire Higgins back list – nine volumes of fiction and memoirs at that point. John made a detour to Kinsale to meet Aidan on a rare sortie outside Dublin. He asked me to book a hotel for him and his travelling companions, and dinner for all of us at a restaurant that served lobster.

We met at our house for aperitifs. The American publisher, as we called him, was pleasant company, but quieter than expected, apprehensive perhaps at finally meeting a writer he had admired so long and so deeply. But the more we talked, the more animated he became. Eventually he insisted on reading aloud his favourite pieces of Aidan's prose and repeating his oft-stated belief that Aidan deserved a place alongside Joyce, Beckett, and Flann O'Brien as the author of passages that were among the finest ever written in English. Unaccustomed to such high praise, Aidan was, for once, lost for words.

True to his promise, John went on to reissue all but one of Aidan's books, as well as five more volumes of essays, letters, and criticism, edited with the help of Irish academic Neil Murphy (now Professor of English at NTU Singapore) and his colleague Daniel Jernigan. This bounty was not without its tensions and almost ceased entirely when Aidan criticised the in-house designer's cover for one of his books in an email. John phoned from Illinois at his wits' end because Aidan's comments had reduced the designer to tears. 'I can't bear to see a woman cry,' he said, 'You must apologise at once or I'll have to drop you from the list.' The one remaining novel to be published by Dalkey, *Lions of the Grunewald*, is scheduled to appear in 2021, over 18 years after that initial meeting. When John O'Brien liked a writer's work, he did not do things by half.

In October 2010, the same year that Dalkey opened their Dublin office, they published three of Aidan's books in an event that also served to introduce the imprint to the city. Aidan's radio plays (including the Flann O'Brien one, *Discords of Good Humour*, originally broadcast on BBC Radio on 13 October 1981) were edited by Daniel and published as *Darkling Plain – Texts for the Air*. The novel *Balcony of Europe* was re-edited with Neil's help, and Neil also edited a collection of critical essays, *The Fragility of Form*. Among the contributors were Annie Proulx, John Banville, Dermot Healy, and Derek Mahon. The event took place in the English department at Trinity and the lecture theatre was

packed. Aidan was then 83 years old and very frail, with failing eyesight. He referred to John as 'the most elusive of publishers. Sometimes he is a grouch. Sometimes he is sweet-natured.'¹⁰ He was then interviewed on stage with great tact and affection by John. Excellent food and wine were served afterwards in an upstairs room.

In addition to *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, Neil and Keith Hopper, an Irish academic familiar to Flann O'Brien studies, also edited and introduced *The Collected Short Stories* and *The Collected Plays* of Dermot Healy, and the reissue of Dermot's early novel, *Fighting with Shadows* (all 2015) for Dalkey Archive Press.¹¹ While they were working on a volume of critical studies of Dermot's work for Dalkey, *Writing the Sky* (2016), Dermot's untimely death in June 2014 turned it into a posthumous Festschrift, an important critical appraisal of a writer who did not get the recognition he deserved in his life.¹²

Challenging Collaborations

Throughout all these moves and financial shifts, John worked extremely hard, publishing on average 50 books a year, as those who worked with him testify. Like many people who work under great pressure, John could be tetchy at times, and expected nothing less than total commitment from those who worked for him. One of the first people to work with John in Dublin was Sarah Davis-Goff, who managed the office for him during his initial year and went on to found Tramp Press, one of Dublin's most interesting – and successful – publishing houses. She recalls:

Working for John wasn't always easy; he was exacting, artistically ambitious and the most relentless worker I've ever met. It was these attributes that also made him so great as a publisher – surely very few have achieved as much as he did for literature, and particularly for work in translation. There was nobody better to learn from, and I'm so grateful for the time we had together – from setting up the Dublin office, to hunting down authors in Estonia and Finland, and flying the Dalkey Archive Press flag at festivals around the world. His death is not just a loss for his friends and family, but for his authors, past, present, and future.¹³

¹⁰ Alannah Hopkin, *A Very Strange Man – A Memoir of Aidan Higgins* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2021), 284.

¹¹ Dermot Healy, *The Collected Short Stories*, ed. and intro. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015); Dermot Healy, *The Collected Plays*, ed. and intro. Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015); Dermot Healy, *Fighting with Shadows*, ed. and intro. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015).

¹² *Dermot Healy: Writing the Sky—Critical Essays and Observations*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016).

¹³ In interview with the author.

The Dublin-based agent, Jonathan Williams, remembers:

We met in person perhaps no more than half-a-dozen times, but we corresponded quite often as agent and publisher, and I think of our relationship as generally an amiable one. He was an enthusiastic advocate for Aidan Higgins's oeuvre, eager to reissue his books and to be the initial publisher of new work. But he and Aidan did not always see eye to eye about the order in which the reissued books should appear, nor the designs of the covers. Our dealings over contracts were mostly agreeable, though his advances more closely resembled retreats. As well as Higgins, I represented Bernard Share, Brian Lynch, and Ralph Cusack. There is still one more book by Cusack to come.

In a world of sometimes undistinguished corporate publishing, Dalkey Archive Press was an unorthodox and stimulating imprint, and I admired several of the writers John took on, especially Anne Carson, William Gaddis, and Claude Simon. And his commitment to translating literature from other languages was impressive.

He had a rather off-centre personality and was apt to be tetchy. Various people who worked for him would tell stories of his crotchety behaviour, and the turnover of key members of staff became legion. His manner was as idiosyncratic as his list – quirky, but essentially sturdy and sound.¹⁴

Neil Murphy first came across John as the editor of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*:

The Review was a genuinely fine, ground-breaking literary journal. I published many book reviews there on quite innovative novels, while I also co-edited with Keith Hopper the *Flann O'Brien Centenary Essays* in 2011 for a special edition of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*.¹⁵

His contribution to Irish writing through the Dalkey Archive Press, aside from the broader contribution to international postmodern and contemporary writing, was significant. Apart from Aidan Higgins, Dermot Healy, and Flann O'Brien, he published many Irish novels, including work by Dorothy Nelson, Bernard Share, Eimar O'Duffy, Alf MacLochlainn, Brian Lynch, Brigid Brophy, Des Hogan, and many others. His commitment to innovative writing was spot-on, and his instinct as a recoverer of major writing was incomparable among his generation. That was his true gift: he stubbornly did not allow important writing to drift out of print; he rescued it. The true Irish literary tradition is one of innovation

¹⁴ In interview with the author.

¹⁵ *Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays*, ed. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011).

(Sterne–Wilde–Joyce–Beckett–Flann–Aidan–Dermot and so on), and during conversations I had with him, he was acutely aware of this. He wasn't just rescuing stray dogs. He had a vision of what good literature was – which was separate to what might sell.¹⁶

Neil and Keith had several run-ins with John as a copyeditor, as did Jonathan and I on behalf of Aidan. Says Neil: 'He didn't give a damn. He repeatedly rebuked me and Keith for trying to get the prose "right" – nobody cares, he would say – but he was wrong about that. Relations deteriorated during the production of the Healy books, and he became quite difficult to deal with, whereas before he was quite pleasant.'¹⁷ Like many people, Neil attributed this to John's increasingly acute health problems.

Maebh Long also suffered huge difficulties in email communication with John O'Brien from her base in New Zealand, in the course of work on *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*:

As John's health deteriorated and the internal processes within Dalkey did not appear to be able to adjust to his long absences, communication became almost impossible. Important emails went unanswered for months, proofs lacked whole sections of pages and changes to layout took protracted negotiation or were overlooked. I think that this reflected John's health and his resistance to delegation rather than a disregard for literature, but from an editor's perspective it made publishing with Dalkey in the final years of John's life a sadly unsatisfactory – and frequently painful – affair.¹⁸

John Toomey published two novels with Dalkey Archive Press, *Huddleston Road* (2012) and *Slipping* (2017), both edited by John, and worked for some years part-time as the company's Dublin publicist. He comments:

Working with John was an experience. Anyone who worked for Dalkey will tell you that. A lot of people didn't last long, leaving for the sake of their own sanity or dismissed by John via some invariably blunt email. The John O'Brien I knew, as a boss, could be irritable and rude and intolerant of anyone's inability to read his mind. In fact, he often said to me, 'I just need an assistant who can read my mind.' As I laughed disbelievingly at the outlandishness of these expectations, he would get annoyed with me and throw his hands in the air in that short, aggressive gesture of frustration that was one of his signatures; he couldn't comprehend any lowering of

¹⁶ In interview with the author.

¹⁷ In interview with the author.

¹⁸ In interview with the author.

expectations, no matter how unreasonable. When you worked for Dalkey Archive, you stared down the barrel at John O'Brien on a daily basis [...]. It wasn't for the faint-hearted, that's for sure. You will have no trouble finding people who would be more than happy to verify this same story. But what you will not find so readily, and what you should know, is that he was also immensely kind, generous, and decent. He took in all measure of strays. I suppose he had a soft spot for the down-trodden. That should be part of John O'Brien's story too, I think.¹⁹

A Modest Proposal

In 2012, frustrated at the high turnover of assistants in the Dublin office (one had recently left on the grounds that he had to attend a friend's wedding in Rio), and fed up with the low priority some were giving to their long sought after start in publishing, John placed a spoof ad online which concluded:

Any of the following will be grounds for immediate dismissal during the probationary period: coming in late or leaving early without prior permission; being unavailable at night or on the weekends; failing to meet any goals; giving unsolicited advice about how to run things; taking personal phone calls during work hours; gossiping; misusing company property, including surfing the internet while at work . . . failing to respond to emails in a timely way. . . . DO NOT APPLY if you have a work history containing any of the above.²⁰

There was uproar on social media, where it was dubbed the 'Worst job posting ever,' and John was denounced as a monster.²¹ To his horror, in the land of Swift and Myles, people were taking this satire seriously. 'It's a modest proposal,' he told *The Irish Times*, when they contacted him looking for an explanation.²²

To my mind, this ad was behind John's decision to commission an anthology of Irish satirical writing. John found two major exceptions to what he saw as the prevailing blandness of contemporary Irish writing: Kevin Barry and Rob Doyle. Rob

¹⁹ John Toomey, 'Staring Down the Barrel with John O'Brien' (12 December 2020): <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/staring-down-the-barrel-with-john-o-brien-1.4434053>

²⁰ This spoof ad was published online on the DAP website in early December 2012 but has since been removed. So has an online piece in *Totally Dublin*, and a piece written about it in *The Irish Times*. It can still be found here: <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/12/18/dalkey-archive-presss-infamous-ad-the-worst-job-posting-ever-was-satire-sort-of>

²¹ David Daley, 'Worst job posting ever?,' *Salon* (13 December 2012): https://www.salon.com/2012/12/12/worst_job_posting_ever/

²² See Andrew Mortazavi, 'A Modest Proposal For The Precariat Class: Dalkey Archive and Intern Nation,' *Full Stop* (8 January 2013): <https://www.full-stop.net/2013/01/08/blog/amortazavi/a-modest-proposal-for-the-precariat-class-dalkey-archive-and-intern-nation/>

was introduced to John by his publisher, Antony Farrell of the Lilliput Press, and Rob went on to edit *The Other Irish Tradition* (2018). Rob recalls:

John loved my second book, the stories [*This is the Ritual*], which are gleefully cruel and satirical of Irish literature, so I was obviously the person to edit an anthology of Irish satire.²³ We had a long lunch in Wexford, where I was living, and we drew up a list of ten or twelve people he really wanted in – Swift, *Ulysses*, Flann O'Brien, Aidan Higgins, totemic figures – then he gave me a free hand with the rest. He really wanted my take on the contemporary authors. I was wondering how he was going to get back to Dublin after that lunch, but it turned out he had a taxi waiting for him all the time.

Doyle, who studied philosophy and then psychoanalysis at Trinity rather than literature, had discovered Dalkey Archive Press's fiction list in London:

I was a penniless reader scouring second-hand bookshops and it became a fixed notion that Dalkey Archive Press was a mark of quality, an imprint that got crucial and fascinating books out into the world. I started with Aidan Higgins and Desmond Hogan. I discovered that the old saying, 'get out of Ireland if you want to be a writer,' still applied.

In conclusion, Rob added, 'I know other people had problems with JOB, but predominantly my relations with JOB were positive and very pleasant, even affectionate. He got a lot done, and I admired that.'²⁴

Reasons to be Grateful

Shortly before John died, he and Chad Post, his former right-hand man, one of those rare people who could read his mind, were reconciled after a long estrangement. Chad agreed to take Dalkey Archive Press's list on, alongside his own at Deep Vellum Press. It was an enormous relief to John, and he was very pleased to know that the Press had a future beyond his own lifespan.

I would like to let Chad have the last word, quoted from a written tribute to his mentor on *Words Without Borders*:

Was he demanding? The most demanding human I ever met. Was he controversial? Most definitely. Was he unflappable? He had a vision of literature that was unwavering. Was he concerned about the future? All he wanted was for these books to out-survive him. And they will.

²³ Rob Doyle, *This is the Ritual* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

²⁴ In interview with the author.

There's a quote from Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth* that John used to repeat on a regular basis, 'we'll never see the likes of him again.' John, your iconoclastic nature was divisive – just like your books – but was a necessary corrective for this industry, a fresh honesty of emotion and intellectual assessment that was so individual, so committed, that people didn't exactly know how to interact with you. And John? We'll never see the likes of you again.²⁵



John O'Brien in Dublin, photograph with permission by Neil Donnelly

²⁵ Chad W. Post, 'Remembering John O'Brien,' *Words Without Borders* (16 December 2020): <https://www.wordswithout-borders.org/dispatches/article/remembering-john-obrien-dalkey-archive-chad-post>

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

