



The Parish Review
Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies

Carol Taaffe, 'Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), xxxviii+603 pp., ISBN: 9781628971835, paperback, \$26.00; *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 1-6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.6573>



Open Library of Humanities

Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), xxxviii+603 pp., ISBN: 9781628971835, paperback, \$26.00

Carol Taaffe, Cork, IE, caroltaaffe@gmail.com

Review of Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018).

The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

OPEN ACCESS



The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien, expertly edited by Maebh Long, is a landmark publication for all scholars and students of Brian O'Nolan. Nearly fifty years ago, a small collection of letters relating to the publication of Flann O'Brien's novels was published in the *Journal of Irish Literature*,¹ and it has been a long wait since for a comprehensive edition of his correspondence. The letters gathered here range over nearly thirty years: from O'Nolan's first pseudonymous outings in the letters page of *The Irish Times* in 1938 to correspondence written from his sickbed in March 1966. Those final letters show O'Nolan still dealing with business matters relating to his first and most successful novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In some ways time had stood still, though the intervening decades had not been kind.

Brian O'Nolan is, of course, a famously elusive character. The biography by his friend and contemporary Anthony Cronin painted a Dublin writer very much of his time,² but some mysteries have survived the biographer's pen. So for many, the first attraction of *The Collected Letters* might be the prospect of discovering a little more of the man behind the polyphonic writer. Long's well-judged introduction heads off that instinct, quoting Myles na Gopaleen's distaste for 'the type of biography that lifts the veil' and 'hacks down the elaborate facades one has spent a lifetime in erecting.'³ As Long notes, this collection is a 'presentation of a life in and of letters that does not so much lift the veil as show the veils in the process of their weaving' (xii).

As a volume of personal and professional correspondence, *The Collected Letters* is heavily weighted towards the latter. The letters gathered here chart the process of publication for all O'Nolan's novels (there is little on *Cruiskeen Lawn*), and together they show his careful attention to the business of writing. Some are illuminating on editorial concerns: there are hints at the pressure of the censor on the final shape of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht*, for instance (10–11, 108). But more revealing still are the letters charting the composition and reception of the last two novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*. This correspondence from the later stage of O'Nolan's career is aptly described by Long as a 'mixture of fretfulness and swagger' (xvi), the loss of his civil service income in 1953 having put ever more pressure on his fitful literary career.

Since business correspondence dominates this collection, it all the more clearly exposes the course of O'Nolan's professional development. In corresponding with A. M. Heath in 1938 on revisions to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he shows all the amenability and uncertainty of the young unpublished writer. In October 1940, a few months after the

¹ Brian O'Nolan, 'A Sheaf of Letters,' eds. Robert Hogan and Gordon Henderson, reprinted in *The Journal of Irish Literature* 3, no. 1, 'A Flann O'Brien Special Number,' eds. Anne Clissmann and David Powell (January 1974): 65–103.

² Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989).

³ Myles na Gopaleen, 'Sherlock Homes,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (27 February 1957): 6.

rejection of *The Third Policeman*, he readily accepts his American agent's cuts to stories, even agreeing that the tale 'John Duffy's Brother' is 'not so good' (97). Just a year later, his correspondence on *An Béal Bocht* with the Dublin publishers Browne & Nolan shows a growing confidence – or a greater reluctance to pander to local sensitivities. Granted, he states that he has removed all reference to “sexual matters” [...] and made every other change necessary to render the text completely aseptic and harmless,' but he would not accept a reader's suggestion to eject the malodorous pig, Ambrós, from the Gael's kitchen; he would not cut a chapter on house-breaking that might offend the people of the West; and he would not add a chapter on teachers (108). (On this third count, a cynic might suggest he did not want to offend a large portion of his potential readership.) In all, though, O'Nolan was generally pragmatic and courteous in his dealing with publishers and agents. The correspondence with his civil service colleagues is of a very different order.

Long is highly selective in the letters she includes from the civil servant, Brian Ó Nualláin, and rightly so. Though there are few collected here on the ordinary business of the Department of Local Government, they are sufficient to indicate Ó Nualláin's mastery of its bland administrative jargon – a mastery that might be expected of the creator of the Catechism of Cliché. For the most part, the letters on civil service business relate to conflicts and crises in his career: from his defensive response in 1946 to Department of Finance uneasiness on his writing career (150–51), to his complaint on failing to be confirmed in a permanent capacity as a Principal Officer (163–68), and his final battle over pension entitlements on retiring due to ill health in 1953 (172–77).

The course of these disputes charts what seems a precipitous personal and professional decline in the later 1940s and 1950s. As early as March 1950, there is a rather bizarre letter to T. J. Coyne, the new Secretary of the Department of Justice, on O'Nolan's conviction for 'failing to stop' at the scene of a car accident. Referring to the Garda report on the incident, which 'has come to [his] notice in the course of official routine,' O'Nolan attaches a 'copy of minute showing the action taken in the Department of Local Government' (156). What action that was is not clear – some disciplinary action or admonition against the author himself? – and it is even more unclear what he hoped to achieve by personally appealing a conviction in the courts to the most senior civil servant in the Department. In the course of his long career, Coyne was intimately involved with the establishment of literary censorship in 1929, as well as the conduct of the wartime press censorship that followed a decade later. In that respect, his entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* notes that 'he had a low opinion of newspapermen, whose professional interests, he felt, were all too frequently

at variance with the interests of the public.'⁴ O'Nolan might have directed his quixotic appeal a little more wisely.

Two years later, he was writing a similarly strident letter to John Garvin, the Secretary of his own Department – and the friend and senior colleague who had suggested the epigraph for *At Swim-Two-Birds*. This time O'Nolan vacillated at great length between professional complaint and personal invective. The issue was that Garvin had failed to advance O'Nolan's confirmation in his post as a Principal Officer, though this was due entirely to his refusal to undertake the medical examination required because of the amount of sick leave he had accumulated. O'Nolan's wounded indignation showed less a sense of the responsibilities of Garvin's position than of the personal loyalty due to himself. That attitude is echoed in the appeal O'Nolan later made to the Minister for Finance, Seán MacEntee, to intervene to secure his retirement on a Principal Officer salary to which, according to civil service rules, he was not entitled. Some years earlier, O'Nolan had served as MacEntee's private secretary, and he had asserted to Garvin that the then Minister for Local Government had assisted 'with suggestions and revisions' on his play *Faustus Kelly* (165). But again, O'Nolan's appeal fell on deaf ears. These combative appeals to authority – to the highest authorities he could find – show him flailing, and falling, and he was still only forty-two.

While there are obvious gaps in *The Collected Letters*, the life can be read between the lines of O'Nolan's professional concerns. The editor has drawn widely from institutional and private collections, but those resources are finite. As early as 1943, there are very few letters for an entire twelve-month period, aside from complaints to the *Standard* on its response to *The Insect Play* and business correspondence on the translation of Brinsley MacNamara's *Margaret Gillan*. There is only one letter in 1944 (on a proposed *Cruiskeen Lawn* miscellany), and for the following year only letters to Niall Montgomery on restoring Michael O'Nolan's gravestone. In January 1947, the one piece of correspondence for that year shows Myles announcing in *The Irish Times* that he was in hospital with a broken leg. According to Cronin, he would be absent from work until the end of September having driven his car into the back of another at traffic lights.⁵ Such accidents, absences, and illnesses would only become more frequent in the following years. Where correspondence from the period 1941–43 shows that O'Nolan was still in reasonably active form – publishing *An Béal Bocht*, producing his Abbey and

⁴ Pauric J. Dempsey, 'Coyne, Thomas Joseph ("Tommy");' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn, online ed. (2009), Online: Royal Irish Academy; Cambridge University Press, 2009–present.

⁵ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 166.

Gate plays, and a *Cruiskeen Lawn* miscellany – by the mid to late 1940s, the business correspondence has largely dwindled to nothing. From January 1947 to 1950 there is silence.

There is little on *Cruiskeen Lawn* in *The Collected Letters*, aside from pay disputes with *The Irish Times*. (Long records that the *Times* destroyed much of its correspondence archive on its move from Tara Street in 2006 (xv).) There are no letters between O’Nolan and his wife Evelyn McDonnell, whom he married in December 1948, and few to family members and friends. As Long notes, it is almost certain that more letters were written on personal matters but ‘O’Nolan was less meticulous about keeping copies of these’ (xvi) (or perhaps he did not wish to leave them to biographers and the literary market). Among the personal letters collected here, most are to the architect and occasional *Cruiskeen Lawn* collaborator Niall Montgomery, whose personal and literary papers are housed in the National Library of Ireland. Long highlights the combative and competitive nature of their correspondence, but a more intimate and vulnerable note is struck in later letters to Jimmy and Dorine Davin (547, 554). These letters, sourced from a private collection, are published here for the first time and illustrate a little seen side of his personal life. Sparse as this personal correspondence is, to read it in sequence is to witness a slow unravelling of a private tragedy – one that is all the more piquant for its gaps and silences. As Long argues, its trajectory ‘should go some way to undoing the sentimentalising of O’Nolan’s addiction’ (xv).

It is almost a relief to read, in May 1959, the letter from the publisher Timothy O’Keeffe that would herald the resurgence of O’Nolan’s literary career. (Two years earlier he had ruefully remarked to a correspondent that his attempted freelance writing career was ‘more free than lance’ (221).) But even O’Keeffe had no great expectations of a revival in O’Nolan’s talent; later that year he triumphantly wrote to Gerald Gross of Pantheon that he had optioned O’Nolan’s ‘next book’ (i.e. the lost *Third Policeman*). That, O’Keeffe supposed, would be the end of it: ‘it is most unlikely he will ever write anything else now – for all kinds of reasons which you may guess at’ (231, n.182). He was to be proved wrong, of course, and a great value of this collection is the substantial correspondence on the writing, editing, and publishing of *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*. In January 1961, O’Nolan was writing to Mark Hamilton that what was meant to be a draft of *The Hard Life* had effectively become the end product: ‘Needless to say, I begin to have enormous doubts about this material’ (267). Its composition was marked by continued ill-health, as that of *The Dalkey Archive* would be. In March 1962, O’Nolan was hinting that he would begin writing the new novel that month; it was nearly a year before he did so. By September, he was in hospital receiving the last rites, and, two months later, a letter to O’Keeffe indicates the ‘supernatural’ efforts made to meet his contractual deadline with Macmillan: ‘they can publish and be damned’ (359).

So *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* closes on doubts and uncertainty. As Long points out, his career 'was marked by so many false starts necessitating so many rebeginnings that O'Nolan, experienced and well-known as he was, effectively remained a young writer throughout, with all the financial insecurity, uncertain reputation, vulnerability, and bluster that entails' (xvi). The editorial decisions made in this collection are significant, given O'Nolan's proliferating pseudonyms and the questions surrounding authorship of letters to *The Irish Times* and other newspapers. Long's inclusions and exclusions are well-judged and clearly explained, and her editorial notes throughout are useful and comprehensive, particularly in identifying lesser-known friends and contemporaries in Dublin. Careful scholarship ensures that lingering mysteries – such as O'Nolan's confusion regarding the 1951 American edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds* – are given much greater clarity in this collection.

One of the impacts of *The Collected Letters*, its editor hopes, will be 'a revisiting and reassessing of our image of O'Nolan, and the movement towards a more nuanced picture of his life' (xix). This valuable collection is undoubtedly the first step in that re-assessment. The nearly thirty years of letters collected here – exposing the various tones and attitudes of the writer, civil servant, friend, and antagonist – have been gifted with an accomplished editor, and this long-awaited collection will be indispensable to future Flann O'Brien studies.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

