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Bureaucratic Poetics: Brian O'Nolan and the Irish Civil Service

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This guest editorial introduces the topic of this special issue, 'Brian O'Nolan and the Irish Civil Service,' and sets out some key points on why the theme of bureaucracy should be considered more closely in O'Nolan criticism. At the same time, the editorial sketches out aspects of the current political and cultural context in which the issue approaches the bureaucrat as a topic of discussion. Calling to attention certain critical interventions on the question of how writers operate when they are concurrently state functionaries, the note sets the stage for O'Nolan to be re-considered as a 'writer-official.' Introducing the articles which make up the issue, the authors point towards how the contributors have taken on such a task of critical re-orientation. The note concludes with an appendix, which provides a detailed timeline of O'Nolan's career in the Irish Civil Service.

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'Brian Bureau': The Irish Writer-Official

As the Civil Service (Stabilisation of Bonus) Regulations, 1940—43, were being written and enacted, the journalistic alter ego of one civil servant in the Irish Department of Local Government and Public Health used his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column in *The Irish Times* to air his grievances – or rather, to explore the problematics of civil servants airing their grievances. In a November 1943 instalment of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, members of the Irish Civil Service begin to knock on the door of Myles na gCopaleen's house in the middle of the night, wondering if they could ask Myles – who apparently knows people in high places – to put in a word with the Minister of Finance to raise their pay. Myles does not strictly side with their plight, but instead responds ('poor chaps') in a way which could be taken as either support or condescending dismissal.¹ By May 1944, the civil servants are at Myles's door again, but this time '[t]hey were most respectable higher service officers.' Myles, it seems, is not to be moved into any great action by their arguments and once more takes up a stance which could be read as mildly sympathetic or patronising: 'Poor little chaps! I calmed them and let them go.' But then, Myles's treatment of the topic reveals a new dimension, and, just for a moment, the belittling tone is reframed. It becomes clear that the series of articles function collectively to express the repression of the civil servant: 'It's a sad business. These civil servants are not permitted to have a strike, hence their volcanic resentment. But is the government sure they won't have a stroke?'²

'Volcanic resentment' in this case does not boil over in the pages of *The Irish Times*. In fact, this series of articles is coyly pitched so that they serve as an outlet for resentment whilst their comic construction revolves around the golden rule that civil servants remain voiceless and without independent agency. This early example of *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s lively relationship to O'Nolan's daily job in the Custom House gives a good indication of the kind of games that Myles would go on to play, till at last the author would overstep the mark, eventually showing too much disregard for the standards best exemplified by the Finance Circular 21/32 'Civil Servants and Politics.' Whilst this rule was not always strictly followed by every civil servant, it nevertheless hung over those with writerly ambitions with its directive 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

¹ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (22 November 1943): 3.

² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (15 May 1944): 3.

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.³

In the end, Myles's series of articles criticising the government's An Tóstal celebrations in January and February 1953 built towards what appeared to be an all too obvious and offensive portrayal of Patrick Smith, then Minister for the Department of Local Government, and O'Nolan was forced to resign from the civil service. In hindsight, Myles's performance in these later sideswipes appears to be deliberately provocative, especially in comparison to *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s earlier engagements with the theme of the civil service which were arch rather than exhibitionist.

It was not only in the public space of the daily paper that O'Nolan's writing was engaged in a complex dance with his duties as a civil servant. O'Nolan's work as author, playwright and translator was in many ways defined by his parallel career in the Irish Civil Service (1935–53), one which saw him quickly proceed to become Private Secretary to the department Minister, a position which he held for three consecutive Ministers.⁴ O'Nolan famously used pseudonyms (most notably, Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen) for his publications. While this practice predated his career in the Irish Civil Service (with much of his student writing using the pseudonym of Brother Barnabus), O'Nolan's tendency to write under different names gained a new strategic usefulness once he joined the Irish Civil Service and was told to abide by Finance Circular 21/32. And yet, his 'spare-time literary activities'⁵ were hardly a well-kept secret – least of all within officialdom. Not only did *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s core audience grow out of O'Nolan's University College Dublin friends and contemporaries, all of whom would have known of his position as a government official, but senior civil servants were also well-aware of O'Nolan's newspaper column and wider aesthetic project.

This sense of overlapping worlds is borne out in O'Nolan's fiction, where state institutions figure prominently. *The Third Policeman* (1940) depicts a Kafkaesque parish run by red tapist policemen; *An Béal Bocht* (1941) portrays insidious mechanisms of British colonial administration; *Cruiskeen Lawn* (1940–66) frequently discusses official policies and satirises aspects of the Irish political system; *Faustus Kelly* (1943), O'Nolan's Abbey play building on Goethe's *Faust* story, sees the devil, having dabbled in Irish politics, fleeing back to hell, horrified by the workings of modern bureaucracy and of Irish local government in particular; the protagonist of *The Dalkey Archive* (1964),

³ 'Circular 21/1932: Civil Servants and Politics' (2 June 1932), The Government of Ireland, 9 May 2022, <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/677df113eafb42ea95d74722097b4934/>.

⁴ See appendix for timeline of O'Nolan's civil service career progression.

⁵ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in *The Complete Novels of Flann O'Brien* (London: Everyman's Library, 2007), 5.

Mick Shaughnessy, is, in his own words, ‘a lowly civil servant,’ and the novel’s narrator later describes the newly discovered and very much alive James Joyce as having the appearance of ‘a tired senior civil servant; certainly not a writer.’⁶ It is perhaps owing to a similarly binary view of the categories of the civil servant and the writer, that critical engagements with the significance of Irish Civil Service to this body of work are surprisingly underdeveloped in O’Nolan studies, despite the centrality of officialdom as a concern in the *oeuvre*.⁷

To address this critical gap, this special issue of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* is dedicated to the topic of ‘Brian O’Nolan and the Irish Civil Service.’ In rebalancing the current scholarship, this set of articles suggests that one can gain a better understanding of O’Nolan’s body of work when paying close attention to the relationship between these two overlapping roles of writer and state functionary. A more thorough engagement with the question of the Irish Civil Service stands to illustrate how O’Nolan’s official career fed into the themes of his fiction and his poetics more widely. The last ten years or so have seen several productive shifts in critical approaches to O’Nolan: the reassessment of the importance of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, for example, has led to an enriched understanding of O’Nolan as a writer who was formed by and reacted to the fast pace of daily print media cycles. Closer engagement with the place of state administration – thematically, aesthetically, experientially – in O’Nolan’s writing career may yet prove to offer another occasion for critical readjustment, not just so that our historicist understanding is sharpened, but also so that our sense of what fed into O’Nolan’s poetics can be enhanced.

The articles collected here spotlight O’Nolan as a writer whose work cannot be disentangled from his function as a civil servant – or, in Ceri Sullivan’s terms, as a ‘writer-official.’⁸ More precisely, our approach follows Sullivan in exploring how ‘experience in office produce[s] characteristic and original modes of writing,’ while also considering how ‘literary techniques and concerns’ affect the writer-official’s ability to do his day job.⁹ The paradigmatic example of the writer-official is, of course, Franz Kafka, and *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings* (2009), edited by Stanley Corngold,

⁶ Flann O’Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, in *Complete Novels*, 615, 772.

⁷ The subject of O’Nolan the civil servant is discussed at some length in: Joseph Brooker, ‘Estopped by Grand Playsaunce: Flann O’Brien’s Post-Colonial Lore,’ *Journal of Law and Society* 31, no. 1 (2004): 15–37; Steven Curran, “‘Could paddy leave off from copying just for five minutes’: Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan,” *Irish University Review* 31, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2001); Michael Phelan, ‘A Watcher in the Wings: A Lingering Look at Myles Na gCopaleen,’ *Administration: Journal of the Institute of Public Administration of Ireland* 24, no. 2 (1976): 96–106; Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

⁸ Ceri Sullivan, *Literature in the Public Service: Sublime Bureaucracy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner, is an important inspiration for this special issue. Treating Kafka's office writings as an 'integral part of his literary *oeuvre*,' Corngold, Greenberg, and Wagner trace the ways in which 'Kafka the author borrowed strategies from Kafka the legal secretary,' with 'themes, images, and ideas' flowing 'back and forth between the documents and Kafka's fiction.'¹⁰ O'Nolan's situation resembles Kafka's in many ways, not least in that O'Nolan shared Kafka's ability to manage, and in some sense merge, paperwork and creative writing; remarkably, he finished *The Third Policeman* in only five months whilst working 'nearly six days a week' in the Custom House.¹¹

Recent scholarship has observed, and begun to address, the need for a clearer picture of the role that O'Nolan's day job played in his creative endeavours. Notably, Joseph Brooker has called for a 'reading of O'Nolan's creative work in the full light of his civil service career, pursuing shared themes and discursive contexts as has been done with Franz Kafka.'¹² In the introduction to *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority* (2017), Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt further tease out the parallel with Kafka:

There is something Quixotic in the systematic targeting of civic institutions and something Kafkaesque in the identification of authority with public bureaus and faceless departments (Max Brod's memory of Kafka laughing uncontrollably while reading out excerpts from *The Trial* bolsters the comparison). On the one hand, an embittered critique of institutional power – ecclesiastic in *The Hard Life*, legal in *The Third Policeman*, academic in *At Swim-Two-Birds*; on the other, an unreserved and outspoken participation in municipal life that invests the politics of *Cruiskeen Lawn* with a practical, down-to-earth idealism. O'Nolan's keenest contribution to the counter-cultural politics of late modernism, then, may well be a compound literary persona, an odd poster boy for twentieth-century baditude – not the rebel without a cause, not the restless youth in a leather jacket, but the paranoid civil-servant 'everyman' in a brown suit, part Quixote, part Joseph K.¹³

¹⁰ Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner, 'Preface,' in *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, eds. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), x–xi.

¹¹ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 71.

¹² Joseph Brooker, 'Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*,' *Affirmations: of the modern* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 101. Indeed, Brooker was calling for more research on the 'precise contribution of his civil service career to O'Nolan's literary career and creative make-up' already in 2004 ('Estopped by Grand Playsaunce,' 20).

¹³ Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt, 'Editors' Introduction,' in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 6.

It is this very ‘compound’ persona of the writer–official that this special issue seeks to illuminate, by spotlighting ‘Brian Bureau,’ as O’Nolan once styled himself in private correspondence.¹⁴

The Bureaucratic Idiom

Brooker’s recent clarion call for more focus to be directed towards O’Nolan the bureaucrat was inspired by the inclusion of official memos and correspondence in the 2018 collection of O’Nolan’s letters, in which the editor Maebh Long also suggests a complementary volume ‘focusing on O’Nolan’s work within the Custom House.’¹⁵ Steps towards a more complete understanding of what the National Archives of Ireland can offer on this front will be crucial in parsing the shifting departmental dynamics which intersected with O’Nolan’s career as a writer. In the meantime, the materials gathered in this issue contribute to and potentially build toward such a challenging archival project, while the five articles published here shed new light on the environment of the Irish Civil Service for O’Nolan as a writer. Together, they illustrate the need for a nuanced and fine-grained view of the various government departments with which O’Nolan would have dealt and the various networks of civil servants that were in some cases supportive and in others disapproving of O’Nolan and his literary exploits.

Illustrative of the danger of reducing this complex environment, it has been suggested by O’Nolan’s senior in his department, John Garvin, that the author had trouble learning ‘that official letters were not an appropriate medium for expressing his personality.’¹⁶ Garvin’s comments on O’Nolan’s professional development give credence to Michael Rubenstein’s description of O’Nolan’s first months in office as a matter of entering a ‘bureaucratic machine’ devoted to the task of breaking the ‘college-boy irreverence for institutional authority and of disciplining him in the art of the office memo and the official report.’¹⁷ And yet, O’Nolan’s superiors also aided O’Nolan in his literary work, with Garvin helping to edit the author’s first published novel, *At Swim–Two–Birds*, and Seán MacEntee, the Minister for Local Government

¹⁴ Joseph Brooker observes that O’Nolan once signed a letter to friends ‘Brian Bureau’—a ‘play on the historic Irish chieftain Brian Boru, with an ingenious hint of the penman and former bureaucrat’ (*Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, 105–6).

¹⁵ Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), xxi.

¹⁶ John Garvin, ‘Sweetscented Manuscripts,’ in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O’Nolan*, ed. Timothy O’Keeffe (London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe, 1973), 54. Indeed, archival documents, such as the borderline vitriolic memorandum on the Superannuation Bill of 1944, suggest that O’Nolan could be as outspoken in his official role as in his journalism and fiction. At the same time, as Long notes, O’Nolan’s official letters were frequently written in ‘a style so archetypically administrative as to warrant inclusion in a civil service catechism of cliché.’ Maebh Long, ‘Introduction,’ in Flann O’Brien, *The Collected Letters*, xxi. The famous example is O’Nolan’s report on the Cavan Orphanage fire in 1943, which may be contrasted with the spoof report that he produced in the form of a limerick after the hearing.

¹⁷ Rubenstein, *Public Works*, 99.

under whom O’Nolan was then serving as Private Secretary, offering ‘suggestions and revisions’ for *Faustus Kelly*.¹⁸

The entangled relationship between O’Nolan’s civil service duties and his literary work compels us to re-examine and complicate the supposedly antagonistic relationship between, on the one hand, the bureaucratic ‘machine,’ and on the other, O’Nolan’s creativity and anti-authoritarianism. As a civil servant, Carol Taaffe has noted, O’Nolan had ‘much invested in the new Ireland which many of his contemporaries excoriated – indeed in some senses he embodied the very values that he mocked.’¹⁹ O’Nolan’s day job was in this sense integral to his authorial personae, serving as an important foil for his comic extravagance. The bureaucratic ‘machine’ could evidently be made to work for the creative writer. Rubenstein observes that O’Nolan’s column demonstrates ‘his gift for perverting the bureaucratic idiom he was forced to practice in the office for radically different ends – usually in the form of savage parody.’²⁰ Steven Curran similarly identifies a gradual maturation of the ‘uneasy marriage’ of O’Nolan’s roles as senior civil servant and literary journalist, wherein he first attempted to ‘compartmentalise’ these two occupations, before fruitfully interweaving them, in the mid-1940s, allowing civil service dealings to become the ‘raw material’ for the column.²¹ A *Cruiskeen Lawn* article published in August 1946 illustrates one way in which Myles in this period utilised O’Nolan’s experiences in the Custom House to focus on the bureaucratic effect on linguistic expression. In this instalment, Myles points to how ‘[c]ivil servants have invented their own language, a most complicated system of a fabulous prolixity intended to cloud meaning.’²² The article satirises the triteness and obfuscations of civil service officialese, noting that the civil servant does not merely ‘go’ to his office but rather ‘proceeds from his residence to his office,’ and does not ‘enter,’ but instead ‘attends at his office’ – ‘[b]y means of this ingenious tactic he is now *in* his office.’²³ As is so often the case with O’Nolan’s interrogation of the symbolic power of officialdom, this play with the bureaucratic idiom draws out its absurd and irrational aspects, whilst also underlining its capacity to shape our perception of social reality.

The work of writing official speeches, memos, and departmental letters clearly affected O’Nolan’s linguistic awareness of the bureaucratic idiom, and it is likely that

¹⁸ O’Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 165.

¹⁹ Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass*, 2.

²⁰ Rubenstein, *Public Works*, 99.

²¹ Curran, ‘Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan,’ 353–4. Reflecting on O’Nolan’s alleged lack of inspiration toward the end of his life, co-worker, Michael Phelan suggests that the ‘loss of his place in the public service broke the mould Myles had cast himself in’ (‘A Watcher in the Wings,’ 102).

²² Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (21 August 1946): 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

this awareness also influenced his literary prose. O’Nolan’s fiction frequently explores the slipperiness of language as a vehicle of communication which, contradicting itself, becomes a means of confusion or frustration rather than elucidation or progress. One can see this process at play in *Cruiskeen Lawn* where features such as the ‘Catechism of Cliché,’ ‘The Brother,’ and ‘Keats and Chapman,’ all turn, in one way or another, on communication being bound up with frustrating delay. A similar form of forestalled communication runs through large passages of *The Third Policeman*. Ben Kafka (who is appropriately named as a theorist of bureaucracy) writes that:

the story of ‘bureaucracy’ – all of our jokes, anecdotes, complaints, even our occasional stories of triumph – is a story of this desire that is not reducible to a need or demand. It is the story of how paperwork, even when it works, fails us. We never get what we want.²⁴

Kafka presents the idea that the forever-unfinished status of paperwork makes it a symbol of the interminable sense of lacking which desire both requires and sustains. Kafka’s reading of bureaucracy as a function which at once produces and thwarts desire can be likened to O’Nolan’s poetics of dissatisfaction, which so often (as in the writer figures of *The Third Policeman*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and, in a different way, *Cruiskeen Lawn*) sets out to explore the limitations just as much as the possibilities of authorship. Though clearly a less dogged engagement than that of Franz Kafka, O’Nolan’s preoccupation with the small irritations and hold ups of his official position in the Custom House may in the future come to be appreciated as centrally important to his conception of writing which so often emphasises delay, dead ends, and predictable disappointments.

The idea of the predestined disappointment is even written into the short play script which otherwise could be said to represent one of the only depictions in O’Nolan’s writing of ostensibly cheerful civil service camaraderie. In *The Handsome Carvers: A Tragedy in Two Acts*, the brief second act shows such camaraderie in the form of a much-loved civil servant named Peter Dunleary being congratulated for his consistent work and his recent marriage; however, the even briefer first act shows Dunleary’s subsequent descent into murderous violence, with the first act offering a proleptic view of the result of the second act.²⁵ The play opens with the drunken Dunleary’s attempted murder of his wife. The murderous husband, we learn from the second short act, is

²⁴ Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 78.

²⁵ Flann O’Brien, ‘The Handsome Carvers: A Tragedy in Two Acts,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 259–64.

presented with a gift of some carving knives by a 'mob of civil servants' in a 'cheap hotel' function room.²⁶ The knives, we see in the first act, become murder weapons, and the glass of whiskey handed to him by the Chairman serves as a catalyst for his descent into a murderous and desperately alcoholic state. This short, sharp, and horrific portrayal of a violent disintegration of sense flips on its head, with a heavy and dark sense of irony, the idea of the aggressive, alcoholic civil servant being dismissed from his job. Here, it is the high achievement of Dunleary's civil service work that effectively leads this character into his alcoholic state. While the script remains undated, this short play seems to provide a fictional inversion of O'Nolan's own departure from the Department of Local Government, with a likely subtext being O'Nolan's anger at the financial conditions of his dismissal.

In contrast to the grimness of this portrayal of bureaucratic camaraderie, the Irish Civil Service proved to be a fruitful breeding ground for those with literary ambitions. It would thus be wrong to suggest that O'Nolan's position as a writer who drew creative influence from the environment of the Irish Civil Service is unique. On the contrary, part of the thinking behind this special issue is that more consideration might be paid to the wider topic of the writer-official's great preponderance in Ireland, especially in the twentieth century. O'Nolan's creative engagement with public administration is part of a long tradition of Irish writing on state bureaucracy. The richness of this tradition is evidenced by Michael Mulreany and Denis O'Brien's anthology, *Lord of the Files: Working for the Government* (2011), which collects commentaries on public administration in both literary works and official documents, including snippets from Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and *Myles Away from Dublin*, as well as from numerous *Cruiskeen Lawn* articles. Mulreany and O'Brien highlight the literary dimensions of official documents, pointing to the 'effulgent' passages included in the anthology as evidence of the 'intoxication of administration.'²⁷ They also emphasise the historical conjunctures of literature and officialdom, noting that, early in Ireland's history:

the description 'scribe' or 'poet' was to a degree interchangeable with 'public servant,' albeit of a very rudimentary form. The scribe enshrined, and helped interpret, law, and the poet memorialised events and recalled custom, procedure, family history, and inheritance. Both roles, often combined in one person, were of importance to the king or local nobility.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 262.

²⁷ Michael Mulreany and Denis O'Brien, 'Introduction,' in *Lord of the Files: Working for the Government - An Anthology*, eds. Michael Mulreany and Denis O'Brien (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2011), xiii.

²⁸ Ibid., xi.

This overlap has continued into the age of modern statehood, they argue, in so far as aspiring Irish writers have been ‘attracted to work in the public sector’ and ‘develop[ed] their skills and life experience while working there.’²⁹ There are a great number of Irish writers who have been employed in the civil service, many of whom are featured in *Lord of the Files*, a highly useful text which offers multiple ways into the wealth of literature that has either centred on or come out of the Irish bureaucratic system.³⁰ Such writers in the Irish Civil Service include, among many others, Denis Devlin, Conor Cruise O’Brien, Thomas Kinsella, Dennis O’Driscoll, and Mervyn Wall, with Wall in particular offering an interesting example of a writer with a penchant for satire and the fantastical who was able, unlike O’Nolan, to balance his official career more sustainably alongside his literary endeavours.

‘This sort of thing goes on forever – and there you are’

The Irish bureaucratic system, of course, not only stirs wider interest from a literary perspective. Bureaucracy has at various points in modern history become a focus of political debates, as mediated through journalistic interventions and popular discourse. Beyond the Irish context, these flare ups of fascinated hatred towards bureaucracy have often occurred as a result of spikes in political extremism. It happens that two of the more significant periods where this popular focus on bureaucracy took place connect the years of O’Nolan’s early career and the present day. As we planned to begin this project on O’Nolan and the civil service, we had just experienced the sinister return of politicised and media-amplified hostility towards the notion of bureaucracy. The cyclical nature of hostility towards bureaucrats calls to mind the description O’Nolan gives of *The Third Policeman*’s surreal hellscape in a letter to William Saroyan in 1940: ‘this sort of thing goes on forever – and there you are.’³¹

This special issue began to take shape in the form of a two-day online workshop towards the end of November 2020. It commenced therefore as the dust settled on a half-decade which had seen the notion of ‘bureaucracy’ – in certain ways eerily similar to the rise of extremism in the 1930s – take centre stage in several highly divisive national and international debates, most notably in the case of Brexit and the rise and fall of Donald Trump. It was interesting to observe the shifting valency of hitherto unsexy terms such as ‘bureaucrat’ as they were transformed into hot-topic keywords that cut through from political journalism into popular discourse. Illustrative of this point, the

²⁹ Ibid., xi.

³⁰ For another account of the wealth of writers in the Irish Civil Service, see George O’Brien, ‘Irish Civil Service was the Biggest Patron of the Arts since the Medici,’ *The Irish Times* (3 February 2018): 25.

³¹ Qtd in O’Brien, *Complete Novels*, 405.

choice of certain novelists to harness both the heat and the mystique emanating from this area suggested a change in the view of state officialdom as defined by ennui. As Russell Williams put it in his review of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Les Émotions* (2020) for the *Times Literary Supplement*:

Back in the distant mists of *la rentrée* 2016, if a novelist had published a book about the waning of European government whose protagonist was an understated middle-aged Brussels Eurocrat, you might speculate that potential readers would be a little underwhelmed. Publishing such a novel four long years later, however, when the European project is beset by tensions and challenged by global crises related to a pandemic, climate change, and populist politics, feels somewhat timely.³²

The media-refracted view of bureaucrats underwent changes both on the fringes and in mainstream discourse: bureaucrats were no longer characterised from the outside with indifference, but with a keen and urgent sense that they were at the convergence of some of the most pressing political and cultural concerns of the time.

One of the cornerstones of the Brexit campaign was a nightmarish reimagining of the dangers of the bureaucratic monolith of the European Union. The cliché (more than worthy of its place in the catechism) of 'Brussels Bureaucrats' rang out, in a sense becoming just as useful a shortcut for political argument whether it was used with venom or irony. Moreover, Brexit did not just encourage a shift in the popular view of bureaucrats, but also in the relationship between the government and the civil service. In the summer of 2020, the head of the UK's 45,000-member civil service Sir Mark Sedwill resigned over disagreements with what he saw as irresponsible Brexit strategies and was replaced by the less experienced Simon Case. In 2022, Case might be better known for having to step down from the task of investigating (now proven) claims of multiple rule breaches taking place at 10 Downing Street during lockdown because it was found that his office was one of the locations of the alleged breaches. One can only wonder what Myles na gCopaleen would have made of such delicious hypocrisies in the increasingly aggressive final decade of *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

That the rising interest in the role of the civil service has not just been a question of media-heightened rhetoric can be seen in the concomitant populist movements in the U.S. which took place over a similar time span as they have developed in the UK. In *The Fifth Risk* (2018), Michael Lewis presents what retrospectively must be seen as a most prescient pre-Covid warning about how gutting out the civil service in America

³² Russell Williams, 'Memories are Made of This' *Times Literary Supplement* (9 October 2020): <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/les-emotions-jean-philippe-toussaint-review-russell-williams/>.

might lead to disaster when an unforeseen crisis must be dealt with. Lewis notes how 20% of the top 6,000 US civil servants quit or were fired in the first year of the Trump administration. In the days which ran up to the workshop from which this special issue proceeds, Trump's moves to dismantle the working method of the federal government's administrative state took a more extreme turn: Executive Order 13957 was passed in the late autumn of 2020 in order to strip away protections from certain career civil servants and to make it easier to bury political appointees into the civil service on a larger scale than has been seen before in the USA. Thankfully for the Joe Biden administration, this executive order came to little effect, with a lack of time in office and threats of lawsuits acting together as significant enough roadblocks to stop the further gutting out of the civil service.

Turning back to the subject of this special issue, it ought not to be forgotten that Brian O'Nolan began his literary career and his civil service career in the mid to late 1930s, when fascist powers in Europe took even more blatant and effective measures to assume key posts in local government and remove political enemies from the civil service. O'Nolan's lived understanding of the role of the civil service might be seen to inform not only his work which most clearly evokes the thematic and stylistic features of bureaucracy but also texts such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* which, for all its gestures towards overturning the structures of the novel, in the end depicts a curtailed rather than a fully realised revolution.³³

There is thus a wealth of reasons why O'Nolan studies should turn to the question of the civil service. Moreover, there are many reasons outside the realms of literature why it is now a fruitful time to think through the role that bureaucracy has as a function for the running of everyday society. Bureaucracy's role in society, as we have seen in the last five years, can easily become the centre of debates not only around the issue of political competency, but also around the way in which a modern state would like to see itself. Even the briefest glances into the posturing, rhetoric, and attempted reformist action against the civil service shows that a lot can be understood about not only a single leader or a government, but also about the political and cultural temperature of a society by assessing the conceived and actual role of bureaucracy. Proceeding in this vein, our particular focus on O'Nolan might also act as a case study to examine literary representations of what Michel Foucault would call the 'administrative grotesque,'³⁴

³³ Conor Dowling has recently argued that in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one 'should not confuse radical literary innovation with emancipatory politics.' See Conor Dowling, 'Bakhtin and the Free State in *At Swim-Two-Birds*,' in *Flann O'Brien: Gallows Humour*, eds. Ruben Borg and Paul Fagan (Cork: University College Cork, 2020), 50.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France, 1974-1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 12.

both from O’Nolan’s experience within the civil service and his experience caricaturing the civil service from without. O’Nolan’s often hostile stances against various aspects of the government and its inner workings took on both public and private forms of expression. These postures are in fact reminiscent of recent responses to notions of bureaucracy in the media-amplified discourse of a populist politics (as in the campaigns for Brexit and Trump), a period which we can only now at a reasonable distance begin in earnest to analyse. Despite, and at times because of, this eventual hostility, so much of O’Nolan’s fiction, as the articles in this forum illustrate, cannot be read without carefully assessing the significance of his time in the Irish Civil Service to his development as a writer.

Contributing Essays

Martin Maguire presents a historical overview in his article ‘“A distasteful milieu”: Brian O’Nolan and the Civil Service 1935–51,’ which contextualises and sheds light on O’Nolan’s career in the civil service. Maguire particularly highlights the literariness of the mid-twentieth century Irish Civil Service, whilst he also illustrates the points of friction for O’Nolan in his working life. Maguire’s detailed outline of the context of O’Nolan’s career in the civil service makes clear how the author’s position as a dissenting writer-official was not unique, tracing why O’Nolan’s particular brand of dissent ultimately became unsustainable.

John Conlan’s article ‘“F_____ the County Council”: Local Government and the Biopolitics of Flann O’Brien’ examines stylistic and thematic correlations between O’Nolan’s fiction and his work in the Department of Local Government and Public Health, most notably his role as secretary for the official Cavan Fire Tribunal Report. Situating aspects of *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Third Policeman* in their biopolitical context, Conlan finds that: ‘O’Nolan [...] was uniquely placed to perceive how inconstancies of the law and state governance impacted individuals on the local level.’

Joseph LaBine and Tobias Harris focus on one of the key figures who inhabits the overlap between O’Nolan’s official and literary careers. In their article ‘John Garvin and Brian O’Nolan in Civil Service,’ LaBine and Harris highlight the ways in which O’Nolan’s colleague John Garvin is an integral and yet critically overlooked figure in the network which connects O’Nolan’s fiction and his civil service career. Providing detailed contextual mapping of his place in this network, the article argues for the significance of Garvin’s creative influence on O’Nolan, especially with regard to Garvin’s particularly civil service-influenced reading of James Joyce.

Two additional essays will appear in issue 6.2. In his article, ‘Miss, Ms., Mrs. and the Semantics of Naming: Brian O’Nolan/Brian Ó Nualláin and An Gúm,’ Brian

Ó Conchubhair tracks the pathway that O’Nolan’s Irish translation of Brinsley MacNamara’s 1933 play *Margaret Gillan* had to take through the state-run An Gúm to come into being. In highlighting the resistance on the part of An Gúm to facilitate O’Nolan’s translation, Ó Conchubhair is able to analyse, with precise attention to arguments around grammar as well as humour, the ways in which O’Nolan clashed with the state’s official vision for the Irish language. The article provides further new evidence that O’Nolan, when battling to have a translation published through An Gúm, spoke as both writer and state official. Along the way, it also shows how as early as 1941, O’Nolan was ready to approach a government department openly as Myles na gCopaleen, as well as showing how such an approach was far from well received.

In ‘Bureaucratic Sorceries in *The Third Policeman*: Anthropological Perspectives on Magic and Officialdom,’ Alexandra Irimia reads *The Third Policeman* through the lens of the complex dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment which can be found in various anthropological theorists’ readings of bureaucracy. As Irimia argues, O’Nolan’s novel illustrates how the irrational nature of magical thinking coexists with a social form of systematisation, regulation, and control.

Appendix: Timeline of Brian O'Nolan's career in the Irish Civil Service

29 July 1935: Brian O'Nolan enters the Irish Civil Service as an Administrative Officer in the Department of Local Government and Public Health, having passed a general examination paper and an Irish interview.

September 1937: O'Nolan becomes Private Secretary to the Minister for the Department of Local Government and Public Health, Seán T. O'Kelly. The role of Private Secretary is crucial to the functioning of the Department, as he or she must act as the primary link between the Minister and other officials inside and outside the Department. The Private Secretary is involved in coordinating the development of the Minister's policy remit, as well as seeing that the Minister's decisions are effectively implemented by the Department.

September 1939–August 1941: O'Nolan is Private Secretary to P. J. Ruttledge.

1941–46: O'Nolan is Private Secretary to Seán MacEntee; it has been suggested (most notably by Steven Curran) that O'Nolan likely helped to write certain of MacEntee's speeches.³⁵

March 1943: O'Nolan is appointed Assistant Principal Officer in charge of the Planning Section for the Department of Local Government.

April 1943: O'Nolan serves as secretary to the Tribunal of Inquiry into the death of thirty-five girls in a fire at the St Joseph's Orphanage in Cavan. The fire occurred on 23 February 1943. The first meeting of the Tribunal was held on 7 April 1943, with the report being published on 17 September 1943.

21 January 1947: Department of Local Government and Public Health split up into Department of Local Government; Department of Health; Department of Social Welfare. O'Nolan continues in the Department of Local Government.

17 February 1948: O'Nolan is promoted to Acting Principal Officer of the Planning Section.

August 1951: O'Nolan ought to be confirmed as Principal Officer of the Department, but he remains on Acting Principal status because he refuses to be examined by the chief medical officer, a procedure which was required due to the amount of O'Nolan's recent sick leave.

5 February 1953: O'Nolan ceases to be a civil servant; he is forced to resign over grounds of ill health. This resignation was driven by the Minister for the Department, Patrick Smith, who had been the butt of recent satirical jokes in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.

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³⁵ See Curran, 'Brian O'Nolan and Eire's Beveridge Plan,' 353–75.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

