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'Information, Please': Brian O'Nolan and the Radio

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This article proposes Irish radio broadcasting as an unexplored context for new directions in Flann O'Brien studies. Brian O'Nolan's involvement in Irish radio spans at least two decades, from the early 1930s into the 1950s, yet the contributions of O'Nolan and his literary circle to Radio Éireann and the BBC remain an under-researched area of Flann O'Brien scholarship. Scholars are faced with the absence of a sound archive to refer to; but this article argues that such absences are part of the ephemeral nature of radio as a medium, and that we must view O'Nolan's work in radio as an emerging, amateur practice within a wider, sustained artistic project. Though we cannot resurrect the live performances themselves, the article draws on new archival evidence to offer a short history of O'Nolan's radio appearances. It attempts to fill the gaps produced by lost media with original radio schedules, reviews, letters, and typescript drafts, and by contextualising O'Nolan's portrayals of radio within a wider social and technological milieu, via the radio-related activity of his circle (Niall Sheridan, Donagh MacDonagh, Niall Montgomery). This context helps us to see how radio aesthetics influenced O'Nolan's metafictional writing, as demonstrated through close readings of how the modernist 'radio' mode informed '!CEÓL!' (1932), *Blather* (1934), and *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939).

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Introduction

Brian O’Nolan first published about radio in 1932, and his first actual on-air appearance occurred in 1935. In his own lifetime, his literary work was disseminated to wide audiences via radio: notable examples include when he read from *At Swim-Two-Birds* on Radio Éireann as ‘Flann O’Brien’ on Sunday 27 August 1939,¹ and the 1940 Radio Éireann production of ‘John Duffy’s Brother.’² While less regular than his output for other media, his involvement in Irish radio comprised on-air appearances, readings, and book reviews – as well as adaptations of his fiction and column writing and original scripts for radio – and this activity spanned two decades into the 1950s. And yet, O’Nolan’s on-air appearances and his network of relations to contemporaries, colleagues, and friends who produced work for Irish and British radio remain an under-researched area of Flann O’Brien scholarship.

This article suggests radio studies as a vital new direction for Flann O’Brien studies. To develop this position and lay the groundwork for future work in this area, I draw from the archive to spotlight O’Nolan’s previously undocumented radio appearances and consider them in relation to his Dublin literary circle’s activities on Radio Athlone (established 1933), Radio Éireann (established 1938), and the BBC. Indeed, his friends and acquaintances were involved in diverse aspects of radio production: writing talks and hosting programmes (Niall Sheridan), acting and directing radio plays (Donagh MacDonagh), joining debates and talks shows (Niall Montgomery, Sheridan, and Bertie Smyllie), and delivering literary talks and book programmes (O’Nolan, Benedict Kiely, and Anthony Cronin). Based on these new findings and contexts, I suggest that radio technology enframes O’Nolan’s early fiction and that he may have translated radio consciousness into his fictional writing. Focusing on the O’Nolan circle’s contributions to radio productions between the demise of *Blather* in 1934 and the debut of *Cruiskeen Lawn* in *The Irish Times* in 1940, this article provides archival records of early Irish radio programming and historicises radio production and performance as informing contexts for O’Nolan’s literary output generally, and ‘!CEÓL!’ (1932) and *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) specifically.

¹ The Radio Éireann Programme for Sunday, 27 August 1939 notes “‘At Swim–Two Birds’—Readings by author. Flann O’Brien’ at 6:15pm. See “‘At Swim–Two Birds’—Readings by author. Flann O’Brien,’ *The Nationalist (Tipperary)* (26 August 1939): 10.

² ‘Their Funniest Stories: “John Duffy’s Brother,” by Flan [sic] O’Brien’ aired on Radio Éireann as an hour-long programme on 15 March 1940. See Paul Fagan, ‘Productions and Adaptations of Brian O’Nolan’s Works for Stage, Radio, Screen,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 347.

O'Nolan and Radio Studies

Sadly, there are only a few surviving recordings of O'Nolan's voice, and it seems unlikely that any of his radio appearances were recorded.³ Disc recording at the Radio Athlone studio began in November 1936, more than a year after O'Nolan's first broadcast on the service. But this almost total absence of a sound archive to refer to does not make Irish radio programming in the 1930s and onward a dead-end for Flann O'Brien studies. Such absences are part of the ephemeral nature of radio. Debra Rae Cohen has argued that attempts to write radio back into histories of modernism involve both 'resistance and reconstruction' because radio production renders the conditions of its generation invisible.⁴

Recent studies of both the BBC and Irish radio document the importance of media technologies (the phonograph, gramophone, radio, film, and television) to new strains of modernist writing.⁵ Jeremy Lakoff has attempted such reconstructive and re-constitutive work with Denis Johnston's radio plays. In an essay entitled 'Broadcatastrophe! Denis Johnston's Radio Drama and the Aesthetics of *Working It Out*,' Lakoff argues that Johnston's plays exploit the aesthetic limits of broadcast practice: studio space and radio production form a 'social milieu and creative workshop,' in which 'struggles and triumphs of the studio could become material for self-referential metafictional broadcasts.'⁶ Lakoff connects the metafictional aspects of Johnston's plays to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, noting O'Nolan and Johnston's shared place in 'a tradition that characterizes creation as polyvocal, chaotic, and combative.'⁷ Thus Lakoff productively helps us to read O'Nolan's novelistic innovations within the context of modern broadcasting practices as 'emerging' rather than established forms,

³ At the sixth International Flann O'Brien Conference held at Boston College, Maebh Long played a recording of O'Nolan's voice during her keynote presentation, 'Listening to Brian O'Nolan,' on 8 April 2022. This audio is currently held privately by Long and members of the Ó Nualláin family. This interview may have been conducted in 1965 or 1966. The tape is one of the few extant recordings of O'Nolan's voice.

⁴ Debra Rae Cohen, 'Modernism on Radio,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, eds. Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199545445.013.0033>.

⁵ For key interventions that inform a wider context for literary modernism and Irish broadcasting beyond the studies discussed here, see Damien Keane, *Ireland and the Problem of Information: Irish Writing, Radio, Late Modernist Communication* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); Emilie Morin, 'W. B. Yeats and Broadcasting, 1924–1965,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, no. 1 (2015): 145–75; Emily Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Ian Whittington, *Writing the Radio War: Literature, Politics and the BBC, 1939–1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

⁶ Jeremy Lakoff, 'Broadcatastrophe! Denis Johnston's Radio Drama and the Aesthetics of *Working It Out*,' in *Science, Technology, and Irish Modernism*, eds. Kathryn Conrad, Cólín Parsons, and Julie McCormick Weng (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 160–2.

⁷ Lakoff, 'Broadcatastrophe!,' 164.

advising that we treat 'production as practice.'⁸ Lakoff argues that Johnston's texts mythify radio production by exploiting variously defined broadcast mistakes (dead air, change of venues, dropped microphones, multi-level narration, and so on). These practices draw attention to radio as a form of material production, and such aspects highlight the erasure of the now-forgotten generative conditions of early radio which Cohen discusses.⁹ Such an approach foregrounds the benefit of viewing O'Nolan and Johnston's aestheticisation of radio as tied to historical production realities and studio limitations, and as part of a wider and emerging amateurism in broadcasting.

Steven Connor has argued that the radio-informed strains of modernist cultural production are distinguished by 'an uncannily disembodied vocality' which 'holds the body apart from its voice rather than uniting them.'¹⁰ Paul Fagan contends that 'O'Nolan has not been acknowledged for his significant position in this particular modernist mode [...] despite the prevalence of disembodied voices in his writing.'¹¹ Addressing this gap, Fagan claims the disembodied voice in O'Nolan's oeuvre needs to be read in the context of 'the modern experience of technologies of the voice.'¹² In his intervention, Fagan argues that radio technology is one of the bases for O'Nolan's portrayal of the bodiless voice as a 'posthuman image,' although he foregrounds the trope of 'cinematic disembodiment,' noting how in O'Nolan's oeuvre, 'the motif of disembodiment is recurrently linked to engagements with technological mediation in which image and soundscape, body and voice, are placed out of joint.'¹³ In a notable example of the value of this technological framework for interrogating the specifics of O'Nolan's modernism, Zan Cammack observes how evocations of the Irish War of Independence and Civil War are 'embedded in the presence of a dated gramophone' in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and discusses the 'network of literary and cultural gramphonic references that [O'Nolan] drew upon.'¹⁴ While Fagan's posthuman cinematic imaginary and Cammack's gramphonic reading advance this conversation, studies that focus

⁸ Lakoff, 'Broadcatastrophe!', 178.

⁹ Like O'Nolan, Johnston's meddling with material and aesthetic limits belies a dialectic within the metafictional paradigm. Lakoff highlights the brilliance of Johnston's art: even if his radio plays included broadcast catastrophes in the outer frame – the actual, historical production of the plays live on air – the artifice absorbs these mistakes and licenses resistance.

¹⁰ Steven Connor, 'Echo's Bones: Myth, Modernity, and the Vocalic Uncanny,' in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, eds. Michael Bell and Peter Poellner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 214. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004458512_017.

¹¹ Paul Fagan, 'Voices Off: Brian O'Nolan, Posthumanism, and Cinematic Disembodiment,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 214.

¹² Fagan, 'Voices Off,' 214.

¹³ Paul Fagan, 'Voices Off,' 214–15.

¹⁴ Zan Cammack, 'Gramphonic Strain: Residual Tension in Post-War Literature,' in *Ireland's Gramophones: Material Culture, Memory, and Trauma in Irish Modernism* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2021), 162.

specifically on O’Nolan’s work on radio remain a significant gap in the field’s emerging technological turn, and thus a legitimate area of inquiry.

The sections that follow historicise the function of radio for O’Nolan’s writing and for his circle and attempt to fill critical gaps with original radio schedules, reviews, letters, and typescript drafts. First, I will sketch a picture of the diverse engagements of O’Nolan’s wider literary circle in radio performance, production, and broadcasting, before focusing in on O’Nolan’s documented contributions to the medium. While close readings of specific radio plays by O’Nolan, such as *Something in the Air: A Drama of the Skies* (1959), remain significant gaps in the field, the present article’s concluding section lays the groundwork for this future scholarship by exploring radio-consciousness across O’Nolan’s fictional oeuvre more broadly. We will see how broadcasting and radio technology are contexts that inform O’Nolan’s development of a ‘radio’ mode in his fiction. Specifically, I will treat ‘John Duffy’s Brother’ as a study of writing short fiction for broadcast, and spotlight how O’Nolan explores the phenomenology of the radio listener in ‘!CEÓL!’ and *Blather*. In closing, I will demonstrate how *At Swim-Two-Birds* plays with the physiognomics of radio itself: physics, sound, the abolishment of the original.

Where it Begins: The 1930s UCD Literary Circle on the Radio

O’Nolan’s friends from his University College Dublin (UCD) circle made numerous appearances on Radio Athlone and Radio Éireann. For example, Niall Sheridan and Niall Montgomery – who collaborated with O’Nolan on a variety of projects, including *Blather* and *Cruiskeen Lawn*¹⁵ – took part in radio debate programmes.¹⁶ At 9pm on 5 August 1935, Liam Mac Reamoinn read Niall Sheridan’s piece, ‘The Toucher,’ on the ‘Everyday Eccentrics’ programme broadcast on Radio Athlone.¹⁷ On Sunday, 24 May

¹⁵ See Maebh Long, ‘Plagiarism and the Politics of Friendship: Brian O’Nolan, Niall Sheridan, and Niall Montgomery,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 19–37.

¹⁶ Billed under the headline ‘Poetry Debate,’ Sheridan debated Blánaid Salkeld about ‘The Future of Anglo-Irish Literature’ on 22 August 1935. The Radio Athlone bulletin notes a twenty-minute ‘Poetry’ program, featuring both Salkeld and Sheridan. See ‘The Future of Anglo-Irish Literature,’ *Irish Press* (22 August 1935): 5. Sheridan and Francis Stuart discussed ‘Ireland and the Modern Novel’ on Saturday, 25 October 1935, a talk reported as ‘an item of wide interest.’ See ‘Ireland and the Modern Novel,’ *Evening Herald* (26 October 1935): 4. Montgomery debated Larry Morrow and Noel Hartnett about ‘The Irish Newspaper,’ for instance, on the ‘Pros and Cons’ programme hosted Michael Farrell on 1 September 1941. See ‘Pros and Cons,’ *Meath Chronicle* (30 August 1941): 4. He appeared on ‘Pros and Cons’ again the following week to debate Noel Hartnett and Maura Laverty about ‘Houses and House-Keeping.’ See ‘Pros and Cons,’ *The Londonderry Sentinel* (6 September 1941): 2.

¹⁷ The Radio Athlone broadcast was noted in *The Irish Press* and in *The Evening Herald*, and Sheridan gave a talk on ‘Everyday Eccentrics’ the following week on 12 August. See ‘Niall J. Sheridan—Everyday Eccentrics—Talk,’ *Irish Press* (12 August 1935): 5.

1936, Sheridan, in turn, performed in an hour-long radio production of W. B. Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* (1903) with several of O'Nolan's friends:

The U. C. D. Dramatic Society present 'On Baile's Strand' by W. B. Yeats—James Dorgan, a fool; Donagh MacDonagh, a Blind Man; Nial [sic] Sheridan, Cuchulain, King of Muirthemne; Liam MacReamoinn [sic], Conchubar, High King of Uladh; John Ryan, a Young Man; Bernadette Plunkett and Moya Devlin, Women.¹⁸

Donagh MacDonagh was a key promotor of Irish radio within O'Nolan's circle. In a letter dated 6 May 1939, MacDonagh advised Niall Montgomery to sell a piece he (Montgomery) had written for radio to the *New Yorker*:

You may remember a thing of yours you sent to Jack Sweeny – an abortive B.B.C. talk? Willy and his agent think it can be sold with ease to some New York paper par example the *New Yorker* – if you want it sold will you write Willy c/o Dr. Pat McCartan 400 E 59th at once. He may not be in New York much longer so the sooner you contact him the better. Have you seen swim 2 birds[?] It's great stuff.¹⁹

MacDonagh's letter is significant because it reveals that he was thinking about Montgomery's writing for radio in the same context as *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Writing for radio also informs Montgomery's poetry from this period. He concludes 'Swing Tides of March' (1938), one of the poems he published in *transition* no. 27, by parodying a radio announcement:

YOU have listened this evening to 'Hypo' Chondria and his Nervous Breakdown Gang bringing to you a program of sweat music from the hanging gardens of the Social-Contact Club through the courtesy of Wanamaker—the new thirty-billion Private Relations Corporation. We are now signing off with our signature-melody

¹⁸ 'U. C. D. Dramatic Society Present *On Baile's Strand*,' *Meath Chronicle* (23 May 1936): 8.

¹⁹ See Donagh MacDonagh, 6 May 1939 Letter, Montgomery Correspondence, Niall Montgomery Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS. 50, 118/26/1. Montgomery was living in London from 1938–9, and presumably had offered a piece of writing to the BBC. The person 'Willy' refers to is possibly the Armenian-American writer William Saroyan (1908–81), who travelled to Dublin in June 1939; but the connection to Patrick McCartan (1878–1963), the Irish republican who served the First Dáil on diplomatic missions to the United States, is unclear. MacDonagh later went on to produce a radio version of Saroyan's *My Heart's in the Highlands* (1939). O'Nolan mentions the production in his letter to Saroyan on Saint Valentine's Day, 1940, and Saroyan responded on 9 June 1940, also referencing 'the radio broadcast of *My Heart's in the Highlands*.' Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 70, 77.

'Wanamaker? We can fix that.' And don't forget—next Sunday we are bringing you Senator Moses and his Ten [Stone] Commanders.²⁰

This ending reflexively places the poem firmly within the radio mode. It features paid advertising and parodies the announcements ('YOU have listened [...]. We are now signing off') that follow broadcasts of live bands and orchestras.

Montgomery continued to pitch his services as an on-air reader and performer to radio broadcasters throughout his life. For example, in a letter to the Director of the Poetry Department of the BBC's Third Programme, dated 22 August 1956, Montgomery writes:

I shall be obliged if you will consider permitting me to broadcast any of the verses which I send you with this letter. [...] I have considerable experience of speaking in public and on radio, and, at the request of the Director of the Poetry Room in Harvard, I have recorded readings from *Finnegans Wake* for their library.²¹

The poems were rejected for broadcast, but Montgomery's letter reveals his high self-regard for his recording and on-air speaking abilities.

MacDonagh also frequently hosted 'Information Please.'²² This was a radio programme with a wide audience 'in which questions sent in by listeners were put to members of a panel, and any question that beat the panel earned half-a-crown for the listener who sent it in.'²³ Iarfhlaith Watson notes that, along with 'Question Time at the weekend [...], its partner programme,' 'Information Please' was the 'most popular programme' on Radio Éireann at this time.²⁴ According to Maurice Gorham, the so-called 'experts at different times were R. M. Smyllie, Editor of *The Irish Times*, his successor, Alec Newman, Niall Sheridan, [and] Donagh MacDonagh,' among others.²⁵

²⁰ Niall Montgomery, 'Swing Tides of March,' *transition*, no. 27 (Spring 1938): 110–13. Montgomery's recording of this poem using the pre-publication 1938 text – which Montgomery made at Peter Hunt Studio in Dublin on 4 May 1960 – emphasises radio aesthetics through his delivery and the montage effect of the text. See the tape for Montgomery's 'Sensational, a Collation of Thirteen Poems,' held in the Woodberry Poetry Room at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, PR6026.O43 A6 1960.

²¹ Niall Montgomery, BBC Letter, National Library of Ireland, MS. 50, 118/19/39-41. The BBC did not broadcast any of Montgomery's poems in 1957. Montgomery submitted again, writing on 27 June 1971, asking if the BBC would broadcast a tape of him reading his poems.

²² 'Information Please,' *Belfast Newsletter* (7 August 1940): 3. See also "'Information Please," Compered by Donagh MacDonagh,' *The Londonderry Sentinel* (6 September 1941): 2.

²³ Maurice Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1967), 137.

²⁴ Iarfhlaith Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish: Minority Language, Radio, Television, and Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 25.

²⁵ Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*, 25.

O’Nolan used the phrase ‘Information Please’ in the final paragraph of his 7 September 1940 letter to the Armenian–American novelist and playwright William Saroyan:

Information, please. When are you reading this in the world? What time, day, room? Are you (were you last night) drunk? Who is in the same room, hall, saloon, with you? Do you feel OK?²⁶

The unusual, detached rhythm and clipped sentences of the prose in this paragraph seem more fitting for a telegram than radio, yet the opening phrase suggests an allusion to a popular radio broadcast that featured many figures within O’Nolan’s Dublin literary circle with whom he regularly collaborated. As such, it not only suggests O’Nolan’s knowledge of contemporary Irish radio broadcasting, but also compels us to inquire into his own forays into that medium.

O’Nolan on the Radio

In mid-June 1935, O’Nolan began a new book review programme on Radio Athlone (formerly 2RN) alternating slots with the novelist Francis MacManus. O’Nolan and MacManus’s appearances were announced in *The Irish Independent* in a radio feature, ‘Broadcasting Innovations in Saorstát: New Features in June Programme’:

If the supply of distinguished visitors holds out, they will have their quarter hours at 7 p.m. as frequently as possible. Book reviews will be given on alternate Tuesdays by Francis MacManus and Mr Brian O Nuallain.²⁷

In June 1935, a Radio Athlone bulletin in the *Irish Independent* lists a fifteen-minute talk show with Brian Ó Nualláin entitled ‘Fact and Fancy’ at 7 pm; while a bulletin in *The Nationalist and Leinster Times* refers to the programme as an ‘English Book Review.’²⁸ O’Nolan’s involvement was short lived, and his last documented appearance was on Tuesday, 25 June 1935.²⁹ The book review show saw many iterations and evolved into a talk programme.³⁰

²⁶ O’Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 93.

²⁷ ‘Broadcasting Innovations in Saorstát: New Features in June Programme,’ *Irish Independent* (29 May 1935): 10.

²⁸ ‘Fact and Fancy,’ *Irish Independent* (11 June 1935): 4; ‘English Book Review,’ *The Nationalist and Leinster Times* (8 June 1935): 2. ‘Fact and Fancy’ was a weekly English book review programme on Tuesdays counterpointed by the Monday Irish book review programme.

²⁹ ‘Fact and Fancy,’ *Nenagh Guardian* (22 June 1935): 1.

³⁰ Francis MacManus continued the book reviewing programme for over a decade before eventually joining Radio Éireann as Director of Features in 1948.

On 27 August 1939, as ‘Flann O’Brien,’ O’Nolan read from *At Swim–Two–Birds* for ten minutes. His performance was followed by Thunder Brothers and Albert Healy at the piano.³¹ He very likely composed the Flann O’Brien story, ‘John Duffy’s Brother’ for radio, although it is unclear whether O’Nolan himself read the story on air. According to a 19 February 1940 letter from the Talks Officer, O’Nolan received a fee of £3:3 for the ‘broadcast of John Duffy’s Brother,’³² and it was read on air from 8:50–9:05 pm, sandwiched between ‘Friday Orchestral Hour’ and Stella Seaver playing accordion on 15 March 1940, months before the story was first printed in the *Irish Digest*, in June 1940.³³ As Keith Hopper has noted, ‘the original by-line describes it as being taken “From a Radio Éireann broadcast”.’³⁴ This connection between the text version and its performance on radio impacts our understanding of the story’s composition and reception and informs the ways in which O’Nolan incorporated radio discourse into his overall writing practice. Because of the story’s brevity, and the suitability of its first-person, word-of-mouth textuality to oral performance, ‘John Duffy’s Brother’ succeeds both as a radio medium-specific piece and in its final prose fiction form.³⁵

In other appearances, Myles na gCopaleen presented ‘The Brother’ for twenty-five minutes on 25 December 1943 immediately after ‘Question Time,’ although again it is unclear whether O’Nolan read the piece, or if it was performed by another actor.³⁶ Evidencing Radio Éireann’s interest in engaging him to adapt further columns for broadcast, O’Nolan wrote to the Department of Finance in November 1946:

³¹ “‘At Swim–Two Birds’—Readings by author. Flann O’Brien,’ *The Nationalist (Tipperary)* (26 August 1939): 10.

³² The signature on the typed letter, dated 19 February 1940, from the Talks Officer to ‘Brian O’Nuallain’ is unclear, but the text indicates the date of the broadcast as ‘15 March,’ and ‘Fee of £3:3’ is handwritten below in what may be O’Nolan’s handwriting. ‘Correspondence to Brian O’Nolan,’ Flann O’Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. See ‘John Duffy’s Brother, by Flann O’Brien,’ *The Derry Journal* (15 March 1940): 3.

³³ Flann O’Brien, ‘John Duffy’s Brother,’ *Irish Digest* (June 1940): 69–73.

³⁴ Keith Hopper, ‘Coming Off the Rails: The Strange Case of “John Duffy’s Brother”,’ in *Flann O’Brien, Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 21.

³⁵ Maebh Long notes that O’Nolan’s correspondence suggests that he also adapted his later short story ‘Two in One’ as a radio play. See O’Brien, *Collected Letters*, 181, n. 63.

³⁶ ‘Myles na gCopaleen presents “The Brother”,’ *Connacht Tribune* (25 December 1943): 8. According to Gorham, this Myles Christmas Special was a recurring Radio Éireann feature, although for the most part these were features which O’Nolan certainly did not read. P. P. Maguire read ‘A Drink from The Chruiskeen Lawn’ on Christmas Day 1946. See “‘A Drink from the Chruiskeen Lawn’ Drawn from Myles na gCopaleen and Dispensed by P. P. Maguire,’ *Kerry Champion* (21 December 1946): 3, which Gorham describes as ‘perennial Myles na Gopaleen’ (*Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 153.) A notice entitled ‘Your XMAS Radio Programmes,’ published in the *Sligo Champion* on 27 December 1947, announced the ‘Trials of Myles na gCopaleen,’ which aired on New Year’s Day, 1948. See ‘Trials of Myles na gCopaleen,’ *Derry Sentinel* (1 January 1948): 1. Seán Ó Síothcháin read excerpts from *An Béal Bocht* on 26 September 1946. See “‘An Béal Bocht’ le Myles na gCopaleen,’ *Nenagh Guardian* (21 September 1946): 8.

Quite recently Radio Éireann asked me, in repeated letters, to do a radio feature based on the newspaper work [...]. I could not find the time, but I eventually agreed to hand over a mass of my existing material so that they could get somebody else to work on it.³⁷

Fagan notes that a 'fifteen-minute Myles na gCopaleen piece "A Letter from Dublin" was broadcast on BBC's Third Programme on 12 August 1952.'³⁸ While O'Nolan's Irish-language writing in his columns and fiction more or less ended in 1943, he continued to make radio contributions in and about the Irish language well into the 1950s. On 9 March 1952, he debated Máirtín Ó Cadhain and the publisher Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh on the topic of 'Literature in Irish Today.' Fionntán de Brún has discovered a transcript of O'Nolan's remarks among Ó Cadhain's papers at Trinity College, Dublin. On Monday 18 October 1954, O'Nolan gave a memorial talk on the Gaelic revivalist Fr Eugene O'Growney (1863–99), entitled 'Cuimhne Ar An Athair Eoghan Ua Gramhna.' The carbon copy of this talk is held in the John J. Burns Library at Boston College and is one of the few surviving examples of O'Nolan's writing exclusively for radio. In the O'Growney talk, O'Nolan takes a granular interest in the life and afterlife of a key figure in the Gaelic revival. He discusses O'Growney's relocation to, and death in, Los Angeles, as well as his body's exhumation and return to Ireland. O'Nolan argues seriously in this talk that O'Growney's Requiem Mass and his burial in Maynooth prompted one of the largest displays of public mourning since Parnell (6,000 people attended his Dublin funeral). O'Nolan continued to contribute pieces to radio broadcasters after he retired from the Civil Service, most notably his radio script *Something in the Air: A Drama of the Skies*, which was broadcast for twenty minutes on Radio Éireann on 16 January 1959.³⁹

He also sought work in radio. On 30 March 1957, O'Nolan wrote to Radio Éireann for application forms for 'Station Supervisor,' 'Programme Assistant,' and 'Balance and Control Officer.'⁴⁰ Maebh Long has noted that the 'forms refer to the application for positions in the Cork Broadcasting Studios,' which O'Nolan completed, and on '8 May he received a rejection letter for the positions.'⁴¹ In his 10 May 1957 letter to the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, O'Nolan states that he 'made no application' and 'did not complete' the forms.⁴² Had he been hired, he likely would have preferred a job in the Dublin studios, where Sheridan also worked. Given the wireless activities of

³⁷ O'Brien, *Collected Letters*, 151.

³⁸ Fagan, 'Productions and Adaptations,' 328.

³⁹ Fagan, 'Productions and Adaptations,' 328.

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 220.

⁴¹ O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 223, n. 167.

⁴² O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 223.

his circle throughout the 1930s–40s, and the need to earn a living wage after his Civil Service career had ended and as his column writing was waning, O’Nolan’s desire for the job is understandable and in keeping with the interests of his milieu.

Radio Aesthetics and Politics in ‘!CEÓL!’, *Blather*, and *At Swim-Two-Birds*

While O’Nolan only seldom appeared on radio in comparison to this circle of friends and acquaintances, I want to make the case now that radio broadcasting nevertheless informs the aesthetics of his early literary output in Irish and English. O’Nolan’s first published writing about ‘radio’ and the ‘wireless’ is his 1932 Irish-language short story ‘!CEÓL!: Eachtra an Fhir Ólta,’⁴³ which has been translated into English by Breandán Ó Conaire as ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ and by Jack Fennell as ‘The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC!’⁴⁴ This story reflects on the violent effect of the new medium – the radio craze. In the tale, a drunken lunatic recounts how he is slowly driven mad by ‘Annie Laurie’ constantly playing on the wireless. This is followed by other musical and ‘Talk’ programming, the sounds of which send the man into a murderous rage. He describes being surrounded by radio:

I recognised that it was the voice of a man. Down the stairs with me. The music was emanating from the house next door to my house, on the right hand side. The song finished and a voice said they were ‘going over to the Royal Hotel, Blackpool, for dance music.’ And they went ... and majestically and gently, but waxing in power by the minute, the high voice of the woman said that Maxwelton Braes were ‘bonn-ee.’ [...] [O]n the left hand side, [...] I heard one morning, over the clamour of Annie Laurie and the shindy of the other man, that it was being announced to the world that a gentleman was about to give a ‘Talk’ on the ‘Decoration of the Modern Sitting-Room.’⁴⁵

The narrator adds to his list of grievances – revelries from ‘Radio-Paris,’ a barrel-organ, out of tune bag pipes, and more ‘Talks’ – until finally procuring ‘a long sharp knife’ and killing his two male neighbours ‘who were so enamoured of the radio.’⁴⁶

⁴³ Tobias W. Harris and I have argued that ‘!CEÓL!’ is the main title of this short story; ‘Eachtra an Fhir Ólta’ is simply a subheading announcing the form of the story. See Tobias W. Harris and Joseph LaBine, ‘Drink-Music: The ‘ól’ in Brian Ua Nualláin’s ‘!CEÓL!’ (1932),’ *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O’Brien Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/pr.10521>.

⁴⁴ Flann O’Brien, ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ in O’Brien, *Myles Before Myles*, trans. Breandán Ó Conaire, 173–5; Flann O’Brien, ‘The Tale of the Drunkard: MUSIC,’ in *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 35–7.

⁴⁵ O’Brien, ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ 174.

⁴⁶ O’Brien, ‘The Narrative of the Inebriated Man,’ 175.

'!CEÓL!' depicts the contest between musical and 'talk' programmes on Irish radio. As Watson notes, this conflict resulted from changes 2RN (the predecessor to Radio Athlone) made to its broadcasting practices: 'music programmes accounted for 80% of the total in the 1920s, and although this had decreased to 67% of the total in the 1930s, music continued to be fundamental to Radio Éireann's schedule.'⁴⁷ More specifically, however, the conflict that results in the murder in '!CEÓL!' arises from a lack of familiarity with modern broadcasting practices that was, in many ways, drawn along regional and linguistic lines. The story satirises Irish radio's rural/urban disparity during the early 1930s, reflecting on the ways in which early Irish broadcasting, localised in cities, did not fully reflect the population it served, nor the image the state wished to project.⁴⁸ Watson and Luke Gibbons have documented some of Irish radio's early challenges: broadcasts were predominantly in English, catered to popular taste with modern jazz and dance hall music, and were overly reliant on advertising.⁴⁹ The lack of a separate radio channel in Irish also had 'symbolic' implications for the revival of the language and the nation-building aspects of the state-controlled radio service, as this absence engendered conditions where radio had little impact in the Gaeltacht and among Irish-speaking communities.⁵⁰ The narrator in '!CEÓL!' reflects this outlook; O'Nolan's allusion to 'Radio-Paris,' for instance, reveals a neighbour's Euro-centric bias in the story, yet the allusion to French broadcasting fits this peculiar character who, in a slapstick reversal, proclaims himself Napoleon Bonaparte.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Watson documents that '[t]he two most important types of programmes on 2RN and Radio Éireann during the period of the 1920s–50s were music and news.' See Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*, 25–7.

⁴⁸ Gorham notes political tensions about the lack of a short-wave transmitter in Ireland from the inception of the Athlone station in 1926 into the early 1940s. Luke Gibbons blames the delayed development of Irish radio on the lack of access to public funding. See Gorham, *Forty Years of Irish Broadcasting*, 151–3; Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 74–7.

⁴⁹ Comparing Irish and English programmes, Watson observes that '[m]any, if not most, programmes in Irish did not achieve the same ratings as their equivalents in English,' while several Irish programmes were 'successful in becoming some of the most "popular" programmes on radio or television.' Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*, 5, 24. See also Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 70–77.

⁵⁰ See Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*, 9–37. Watson sees broadcasting in Irish as 'symbolic' in an Irish National context. He writes: 'Radio broadcasting came into existence at a very convenient time for the new Irish state. Some politicians and civil servants saw in it the potential to disseminate and reinforce Irish identity. To a large extent, even radio itself was a symbol of difference – not only did the nation have its own language, religion etc., it also had its own radio station. As well as its symbolic importance, radio was a medium that could be used to create a shared sense of belonging. This is manifested in the programmes broadcast.' Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish*, 3–4.

⁵¹ European broadcasts reaching Ireland or Irish broadcasts reaching the United States were recurring themes for O'Nolan. In a *Cruiskeen Lawn* instalment published in December 1945, for instance, Myles comments on the news that Radio Éireann was to launch a shortwave broadcast service to reach the Irish diaspora, noting that the 'desire to lecture and heckle foreigners arises from a pathologic feeling of superiority and is known to medical science as paranoia.' Myles narrates Copaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times* (5 December 1945): 2.

The third issue of *Blather*, published in November 1934, ran a notice telling readers to 'LISTEN IN TO 2BL [...] the Blather Pirate Station.' 2BL's statement of purpose ran as follows:

The objects of the station are two-fold, even manifold. The primary object is to give Athlone hell. We are going to give it hell every night, and when we are finished giving it hell, we are going to give it red hell. We are going to jam and jam and jam. We are going to perforate its wretched programmes with screams and whistles and scrapings and head-noises and streams of bad language.⁵²

Signal jamming and interruption form a radio phenomenology for O'Nolan's metafictional aesthetic which finds later expression *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Moreover, the jamming 'with screams [...] whistles and scrapings' threatened in the November issue of *Blather* addresses the context of rising fascism of 1930s Europe, especially in light of Theodor W. Adorno's theory of the merged figure of the writer and entertainer with an authoritarian personality. In a private context, Adorno writes, the radio listener responds to an authoritarian voice 'even if the content of that voice or the speaker to whom the individual is listening has no authoritarian features whatsoever.'⁵³ The author-dictator is a central motif in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, figured, in one memorable episode, as a Voice in the Cloud.⁵⁴ Adorno's point that any entertainer can seem like a dictator on the radio concretises the rise of the dictator as a radio personality, and the dictator-author in *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be seen as a translation of that radio consciousness into the novel.

O'Nolan's familiarity with the workings of radio also informs the aesthetic expression of his metafictional novel writing. The courtroom scene in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, for example, can be read within this 'radio mode' in that contrapuntal emphasis on sounds and the aesthetics of radio production inform O'Nolan's poetics. Amplification of voices and live music performed by an unseen orchestra juxtapose silences in this scene, emphasising sound imagery and speaking over other modes of discourse. 'Noiselessly,' the Pooka stands beside Trellis, who finds 'his voice was loud and probably strengthened by the agency of the one that was whispering at his ear.'⁵⁵ Yet the Pooka comically reduces Trellis's voice to 'the level of a whisper' at the precise

⁵² Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (Dublin: Lilliput, 2012), 131–2.

⁵³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 70.

⁵⁴ Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2007), 48.

⁵⁵ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 194.

moment he attempts to object to the proceedings in order 'to protect his constitutional rights and also in an endeavour to save his life.'⁵⁶ His lawyers are, ironically, mute ('a serious blemish'), and Trellis's thoughts are:

lost by the activity of a string orchestra in one of the galleries which struck up a stirring anthem. [...] The orchestra could be heard very faintly as if at a great distance [...] players were unseen but two violins, a viola, a piccolo and a violoncello would be a sagacious guess as to their composition.⁵⁷

O'Nolan plays with amplification and a sense of live music broadcasting to establish drama; and, as with radio production, 'the last bit of music fad[ing]' serves as 'the signal for the opening of the great trial.'⁵⁸ He also alludes to the on-air sign when the judges go 'out behind a curtain in the corner of the hall over which there was a red-lighted sign. [...] The pulse of a mazurka, graceful and lively, came quietly from the distance.'⁵⁹ The courtroom scene's musicality and its affinity with radio production establish the dramatic *showiness* of the show trial Orlick Trellis creates to punish his father. Aesthetically, the courtroom scene can read as a wildly imaginative radio play on its own narrative level within the confines of the rest of the novel. In the case of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, radio aesthetics indirectly animate the writing to great effect.

Conclusion: Radio Studies and Flann O'Brien Studies

In this article, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for necessary future research and scholarship regarding O'Nolan's work on/and the radio in three directions:

1. *Contextual*: by situating O'Nolan in relation to a Dublin (and largely UCD based) literary circle (Sheridan, Montgomery, MacDonagh) that worked on Irish and British radio productions in a variety of roles (writing, performance, interviews, production, advocacy).
2. *Biographical and archival*: by detailing the known radio productions that O'Nolan scripted or gave his voice to, and highlighting the obstacles and possibilities of working with a gap-laden radio archive – for instance, by filling gaps with original radio schedules, reviews, letters, and typescript drafts.

⁵⁶ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 205.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 194–5.

⁵⁸ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 194.

⁵⁹ O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 197.

3. *Critical*: by suggesting how a modernist radio aesthetics might inform new readings O'Nolan's prose writing, through representative close readings of scenes in 'CEÓL!', *Blather*, and *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

The main takeaway from O'Nolan's on-air appearances is the sense we gain of the diffuse ways in which radio informs his output across various modes and discourses. O'Nolan's encounters with radio are not 'major' – they are less regular, more diffuse, more mediated, more tangential than with other media and genres such as novels and short fiction, columns in newspapers, magazines and journals, theatre; even, perhaps, television. But they are still there and still constitute a blind spot in the criticism that needs to be addressed for a fuller picture of the author in his social, cultural, and technological milieu.

O'Nolan's radio contributions – and this article is not an exhaustive catalogue of all his appearances – allow us to see the chameleon author writing for and interacting with a new medium in ways that are both immediately private and public. His friendships with other contributors offer insight into the collective efforts of O'Nolan's circle as they shifted focus from producing a magazine to diffuse appearances and tangential connections to radio broadcasts, whether for financial or creative ends. In one sense, these radio collaborations were an extension of O'Nolan's private relationships – of which we still know surprisingly little – while in another, broader social sense, O'Nolan's radio appearances, as well as Sheridan's, MacDonagh's and Montgomery's, and their radio aesthetics were part of an engaged, highly literate mid-century Irish response to the radio medium. This insight warrants new scholarship and thinking about Irish radio and wireless fiction, beyond the work of Irish high modernists, in the mid-century milieu of which O'Nolan was a key figure.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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