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On Licensed Premises: Galloping Green Revisited

Thomas O'Grady, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA, Thomas.Ogrady@umb.edu

This essay engages with Anthony Cronin's mentioning, in *No Laughing Matter*, Brian O'Nolan's being barred "in writing" from drinking in Byrne's of Galloping Green, a pub within walking distance of O'Nolan's home in Stillorgan. While the letter barring O'Nolan that Cronin alludes to seems not to be extant, this essay offers a first-person remembering of both the physical pub that O'Nolan would have known in the early 1960s and the drinking climate there that he took exception to in a letter addressed to the proprietor, Gerry Byrne, that may have prompted Byrne's own letter barring him.

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Where there is a story, there is also usually a backstory. The story involving Brian O’Nolan that intrigues me most is one just glanced at by Anthony Cronin in his biography *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien*. It involves a falling out between O’Nolan and the proprietor of Byrne’s of Galloping Green, a public house located on the Stillorgan Road, now generally known simply as a stretch of the N11 dual-carriageway leading out of Dublin to Bray in County Wicklow and other points south.¹ It was one of the few pubs within walking distance of Brian and Evelyn O’Nolan’s home at 21 Waltersland Road in Stillorgan that they moved to in 1960.² Still a going concern – its vintage façade notwithstanding, it is in fact a fully contemporary drinking establishment – Byrne’s was my ‘local’ during my student days at University College Dublin in 1977–78. I was a resident of Belmont House, a hostel run by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, not even the length of a football pitch up the road, and over a tall wall, from the pub. (Incidentally, just down the road in the other direction sat the House of Saint John of God, a psychiatric hospital that comes in Samuel Beckett’s *Malone Dies*.) How could I not be intrigued by Cronin’s mentioning in *No Laughing Matter* that the proprietor of Byrne’s holds ‘the distinction of being the only publican ever to bar him [O’Nolan], or perhaps anybody, by letter’?³

‘Local’ History

Back in my day, as in O’Nolan’s time in Stillorgan, Byrne’s of Galloping Green had little viable competition in the vicinity. As Cronin notes: ‘The only other pub in the locality was a vast place with huge spaces in its various lounges.’⁴ O’Nolan’s own description of this pub as ‘Croke Park roofed over’⁵ suggests that it is The Leopardstown Inn, which I also patronised occasionally. Another drinking option would have been Boland’s, a bit further in toward Dublin, in Stillorgan Village. Off in the direction of Blackrock, and not of easily walkable distance, Baker’s Corner in Kill o’ the Grange (more anon) was also apparently within O’Nolan’s new suburban orbit.

The last time I visited Byrne’s was in 2010. I met a couple of old friends there for nostalgia’s sake. At that point I had not darkened the door in twelve years . . . and I was stunned by the transformation of what I remembered (and still remember) as a fairly dowdy public house. The bar area, which was really quite unprepossessing in the late

¹ This roadworks project was begun in the 1950s and completed in the 1970s.

² The street the O’Nolans lived on is consistently misspelled Waterland by O’Nolan in the letters transcribed in *The Collected Letters of Flann O’Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018). As maps, both contemporary and dating back centuries, indicate, ‘Waltersland’ is correct.

³ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 221.

⁴ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 221.

⁵ Quoted in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 221.

'70s – three or four high-backed stools at the bar itself, a dart board (with a chalkboard for keeping league scores), some low wooden stools and tables toward the back – had been updated beyond recognition: in the back corner where I sat with my friends, there were now booths, or at least banquettes, deeply upholstered in leather, or perhaps just leatherette. It all felt quite posh!

On that occasion I did not go over to the lounge side of the pub (as I recall, the two halves of the establishment are linked by a narrow passageway accessed by a sliding panel), though I expect that space too had been upgraded in similar fashion. The last time I had been in the lounge, in 1998 with my wife and our three young daughters in tow (an essential stop on the Grand Tour of Ireland), it was just as I remembered it from twenty years earlier: a room of low tables and stools with some vinyl-covered benches along the walls. And there was a homey fireplace with a low fender so blackened that it may have dated to the pub's establishment in 1879. But the most distinguishing feature in those days was that a visit to the 'jacks' – at least for men – required exiting the building at the back of the lounge and crossing a small courtyard (well, an unroofed area used for storing kegs of Guinness and Harp and Bass) to a dark and dank shed-like structure with a corrugated steel roof that was home to some sort of latrine. I believe I availed myself of that amenity only once.

Two Letters

Obviously, Cronin's very mentioning of Byrne's of Galloping Green has transported me back in time to the pub that O'Nolan found himself barred from by letter. But it also, for me, begs an obvious question about the backstory to that story: on what lofty principle would a publican see fit to deprive a regular patron of the occasion to enjoy a pint of plain or a ball of malt in a hostelry of such lowly comforts? Adverting in *No Laughing Matter* to an earlier 'difference of opinion' O'Nolan had with the proprietor at Baker's Corner regarding a tab he had run up during a drinking session with one of his brothers, Cronin seems to invite the reader to infer a similar misunderstanding with Gerry Byrne, the proprietor of Galloping Green. Cronin quotes in its entirety a letter, dated 25 November 1961, that O'Nolan had his wife Evelyn type to Michael Baker in which, enclosing a cancelled cheque as evidence of his clean slate, he pointedly defends himself against further charges:

I know nothing about the bottle of whiskey and half doz. stouts connected with our visit. It is quite true that I am capable of drinking the contents of a bottle of whiskey, but not the bottle itself. There is no empty bottle in my house . . .⁶

⁶ Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 221; see O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 284–5.

Given O'Nolan's general notoriety as an indefatigable and unapologetic drinker, such history repeating itself is certainly not implausible.

But I have a different hypothesis about the epistolary barring of O'Nolan from Byrne's of Galloping Green. My hypothesis derives from another letter composed by O'Nolan – this one to Gerry Byrne – while he was apparently still in good standing: indeed, dated 28 September 1962, the letter is addressed familiarly to 'Dear Gerry.' Opening by placing himself in 'that esteemed category of being one of your regular customers,' O'Nolan then proceeds with the purpose of his letter: 'Both I and my friend (Séan)' – probably Irish composer Seán Ó Riada, who lived in one of the rowhouses that essentially comprise the hamlet of Galloping Green, though possibly artist Séan O'Sullivan, another of O'Nolan's regular drinking companions – 'have been forced into gulping and galloping at closing time by your new barman.'⁷ Of course, this is a common enough complaint among late-night Irish drinkers. *Time, gentlemen, time . . .* Is there a seasoned pub-goer who has not heard, on repeat, that old refrain and its various accompanying verses? *Drink up now, lads, the Guards are at the door . . . No need to go home, gents, but you can't stay here . . .* As Maebh Long's invaluable publication of his collected letters attests, O'Nolan could be quick to take offence on all manner of matters; still, one might infer that the practice of this ritual enforcement of the drinking laws – in Ireland often 'more honour'd in the breach than the observance' – must have been in the extreme at Galloping Green to warrant a letter to the proprietor.

Yet in advancing his case, O'Nolan, even while writing out of justifiable high dudgeon, opts for a rhetorical strategy that is clearly designed to placate – not to incense – the addressee of his letter. In the second paragraph, for example, he resorts to amiable puns and other wordplay to make his point:

I am aware that your premises are located in Galloping Green (as M na G, I have occasionally run the gallops at Leopardstown, although I confess to never seeing a leopard there). That does not mean that thirsty customers in Galloping Green be subjected to this enforced galloping of their drinks under unnecessary duress at closing time.

Self-evidently, O'Nolan is having some fun here in alluding to the Leopardstown Racecourse, a popular horse track situated in Foxrock, a little more than a mile-and-a-half from Galloping Green.

O'Nolan maintains that genial spirit in the next paragraph but also tries a different tack. He invokes (ironically enough) the hospitality afforded by none other than the

⁷ All quotations from this letter are from O'Brien, *The Collected Letters*, 328–9.

pub that, less than a year earlier, had tried to exact from him further remuneration for a night of conspicuous consumption of spirituous, and other, liquors:

When on occasion I venture further afield to Bakers [sic] Corner for instance, no such problem is encountered. There, even at closing time, Michael Baker issues a clarion call which reminds customers that they are entering the domain of 'INJURY TIME.'

Again, in an attempt to disarm his recipient, Gerry Byrne, O'Nolan deploys language playfully – 'clarion call' with its inflated air of rallying urgency countered by 'injury time,' the extra minutes added by the referee at the end of each half of a football match to compensate for stoppages in play during the running clock of regular time.

In the final paragraph, he riffs on two words – 'rush' and 'standing' (in the sense of 'respectable status') – in his bid to cajole Mr Byrne toward leniency with regard to the fluid notion of 'closing time' generally understood elsewhere and everywhere in Ireland: 'Kindly note, there is no need to unduly RUSH imbibing clients of standing (even seated) at closing, not even in Rush or Portrush!' Is there a touch of Swiftian *sæva indignatio* injected there? I think so. Rush is a small seaside town in north County Dublin. Portrush is a small seaside town in County Antrim in Northern Ireland. (The Irish word *ros* means 'promontory' or 'peninsula.') Each might be thought of as home to 'The Plain People of Ireland' whom O'Nolan, writing as Myles na gCopaleen in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns in *The Irish Times*, clearly understands the simple expectations of.

A Photograph and a Hypothesis

Did O'Nolan's letter to Gerry Byrne bring about the change he hoped for? From my personal experience of drinking in the pub fifteen years later, I think not. For the nine months I lived in Belmont House, from September of 1977 through May of 1978, I visited the pub almost nightly with a quartet of drinking companions who were also students at University College Dublin, and almost nightly we felt we were getting the so-called bum's rush just as soon as our 'last call' pints were pulled and placed in front of us. *Plus ça change?* Gerry Byrne was still the proprietor during this time, and I readily recognise in a photograph from 1963 that was published in 2020 in the *Irish Daily Mail* not only Gerry himself but also the barman that I assume treated O'Nolan so officiously a year earlier.⁸

⁸ See Clare McCarthy, '140-Year-Old Pub Goes Back to the Future with Click and Collect Service,' *Irish Daily Mail* (2 May 2020): 13.

In fact, in the absence of a hard copy of Byrne's missive barring O'Nolan from his pub in Galloping Green (it is referred to by Cronin on seemingly just hearsay evidence), my hypothesis involves the speculation that he wrote said missive in direct response to O'Nolan's: taking exception to the richly mordant wit that the well-known multi-monikered man-of-words so subtly yet so unmistakably targeted at his letter's recipient, the publican employed the same medium of communication to end the matter with blunt finality. *Touché?*

Is that just idle speculation on my part? Why would I even suspect such tit-for-tat retaliation on the part of Gerry Byrne? In all my months of nightly drinking in Galloping Green, I never spoke more than two words to the man or, for that matter, to his curate, though I spoke those two words repeatedly, each time with a slight uptilt of my head in a vaguely conspiratorial manner: *A pint . . .* But I have a tale to tell shared with me by another cohort of occasional drinking companions affiliated with Belmont House, and that tale just may lend sufficient 'standing' (as it were) to my speculation to sustain it as a bona fide hypothesis-grade supposition. That other cohort comprised not UCD students but rather novices for the priesthood at the Oblate Missionary College, young men training to do God's work in Brazil. They lived in modern chalets on the grounds of Belmont House and bicycled daily four miles each way for classes at the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy in Ranelagh. I became good friends with three of the novices in particular – Danny O., Paddy R., and Mossy L. – and would happily treat them to the odd pint either at The Leopardstown Inn or at Byrne's.

Eventually, they would drink at Byrne's *only* if I or some of my fellow secular residents of Belmont House were there to give them 'cover.' For, according to them, the 'management' (as I will now refer to the active agent of what I describe next) of the pub had an 'arrangement' with the superior of the Oblate scholasticate: should he recognise any of the novices in his establishment, he would hospitably pull their pints and take their coin . . . but then slip away to the telephone and 'call above' to the superior, whose name – as I recall distinctly – was Father Malachy. Before the lads had a chance to lick the first sip of roman collar froth from their lips, Father Malachy would be in the door to escort them out the door and back up to their chalets. I am sure that, to a man, all three of my old friends would still swear today to the veracity of what I recount.

They might, however, stop me short of claiming that such mean-spiritedness contributed to the short life of their religious vocations. Paddy R. and Mossy L. both went all the way through ordination, but neither of them lasted long enough in the priesthood to make it to Brazil – I heard they got only as far as the Oblate parish on Tyrconnell Road in Inchicore before utter disillusionment set in. Danny O. did not make it even to ordination. On 8 December 1978, the Feast of Mary Immaculate, he

took the customary final vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience plus a further vow of perseverance required by the Oblates, which entails a promise to remain in the congregation until death; not many months later I had a letter from our mutual dear friend Joan C., who had been one of his official witnesses on the altar, saying 'Danny has left the Oblates . . .' Of course, that turn of events begs another obvious question: 'Is it about a bicycle?'⁹ In fact, Danny and Joan had met when he was bicycling to Milltown Institute and she in the opposite direction, from her student digs in the O'Nolans' old neighbourhood in Stillorgan to Carysfort Teachers College in Blackrock. Lead us into temptation: they have now been blissfully married for forty years. But I digress . . .

More to the point, I wonder if that tale from the Oblate lads really bolsters my hypothesis about Gerry Byrne's purported letter to Brian O'Nolan. Is it fair to speculate that the presumably contrarian spirit of said letter was cut out of similar cloth to the management's dodgy 'arrangement' with Father Malachy a decade-and-a-half later? Is it what another letter writer – 'V. Wright, Turf Correspondent, Wyvern Cottage, Newmarket, Suffolk' – would label a 'THREE-STAR CAST-IRON PLUNGER'?¹⁰ I suppose that in applying the scientific method of 'testing' to the merits of my 'supposition,' some of my fellow exegetists of the works and the life and the times of O'Nolan/Flann/Myles might draw from 'the treasury of . . . [their] mind[s]' a 'witticism' that O'Nolan, writing as Flann O'Brien, allows his student-narrator in *At Swim-Two-Birds* to deploy twice – the first time 'unperceived' and thus unappreciated by his inaugural drinking companion Kelly, the second rewarded by 'Two laughs in unison' from his friends Brinsley and Donaghy: 'If that conclusion is the result of a mental syllogism, it is fallacious, being based on licensed premises.'¹¹ In any case, my aim in proffering this backstory to the missive from Gerry Byrne to Brian O'Nolan is not to declare the whole matter 'Signed, Sealed, and Delivered' but, more modestly, to open wide the door (not just the letter slot) for a peek inside the pub that O'Nolan managed to get himself barred from – in writing.

⁹ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (New York: Walker and Company, 1967), 54.

¹⁰ Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 13. I quote not only from the edition but from the very copy of the novel that I bought and read during my time living in the vicinity of Byrne's of Galloping Green.

¹¹ O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 21, 47.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

