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Review of *Smyllie's Ireland: Protestants, Independence, and the Man Who Ran the Irish Times* (2019), by Caleb Wood Richardson

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The first scholarly book-length account of Robert Maire Smyllie, editor of *The Irish Times* between 1934 and 1954 and the central figure in a literary coterie to which Brian O'Nolan belonged, treats Smyllie as a lens on the historical experience of southern Irish Protestants in the twentieth century rather than providing a biography. Nevertheless, Richardson goes far beyond existing accounts to present the details of underexplored areas, such as Smyllie's teaching of Irish or travels in Czechoslovakia. Richardson picks his way through the mass of Smyllie's journalism by drawing out fresh perspectives on the Protestant orientation towards several interlocking themes, such as localism, censorship, British patriotism, Irish nationalism, and cultural patronage. Smyllie's relationship to Brian O'Nolan's *Cruiskeen Lawn* column receives most of a chapter dedicated to southern Irish Protestants as 'Gaels.' The book is a clarion call for scholars to turn to Smyllie as an important context for O'Nolan.

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Caleb Wood Richardson has brought us the first scholarly monograph focused on Robert Maire Smyllie, editor of *The Irish Times* between 1934 and 1954 and the centre of the Palace Bar Set: an influential literary coterie of Dublin writers, artists, professionals, and civil servants to which Brian O’Nolan belonged. Smyllie can justifiably be described as the most eccentric literary figure of mid-century Dublin. The journalist Patrick Campbell recalls how Smyllie ‘wore a green sombrero, weighed twenty-two stone, sang parts of his leading articles in operatic recitative, and grew the nail on his little finger into the shape of a pen nib, like Keats.’¹ Smyllie was born to Robert Smyllie, a Scottish Presbyterian, and Elisabeth Follis, ‘originally from Cork,’ in Glasgow in 1893.² He was brought up in Sligo, where his father rose to edit a Unionist newspaper, the *Sligo Times* (17–34). Smyllie cultivated a riotous professional idiolect which required staff to understand that bicycles were ‘velocipedes’ and know what to do when ordered to ‘prehensilize some Bosnian peasants’ (85). The ‘perpetually dishevelled’ editor worked to a frenetic, alcohol-fuelled schedule. He blew into *The Irish Times* offices on Westmoreland Street at about 4.30 pm, where he was immediately accosted by petitioners selling stories or asking for favours. At 6 pm Smyllie fled his harassers to hold court for his coterie at the Palace Bar and finally returned to finish the next day’s newspaper between 9.30 pm and 3 am (81).

Despite his extreme eccentricity and idiosyncratic take on almost every topic, Smyllie embodied a post-independence transition in Protestant identity from Unionist to ‘ex-Unionist,’ which is what draws Richardson to him for the purposes of his study. He was, in the words of Brian Inglis, who worked for him at *The Irish Times*, ‘the man who had done more, probably, than anybody else to persuade the Irish Unionists, small in numbers, but disproportionately influential owing to their wealth and their social standing, to come to terms with the Irish Free State.’³ Smyllie achieved this because, though he was an irascible polemicist and steadfast critic of the de Valera administration, his warmth, bravery, and principled political liberalism won him and *The Irish Times* the respect of erstwhile Catholic nationalist opponents. Todd Andrews, a Fianna Fáil politician, recalls that a ‘[favourable] comment from the *Irish Times* made a minister’s day. Favourable comment from the other two Dublin dailies was of no consequence to them.’⁴ Smyllie encapsulated his contradictory political identity and *joie de vivre* when he wrote in 1953

¹ This memorable portrait is by Patrick Campbell, later Baron Glenavy, in an edition of his *Spectator* column, ‘Come Here Till I Tell You,’ entitled ‘Mr. Smyllie, Sir’ (24 April 1959): 7. Available at <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/24th-april-1959/9/come-here-till-i-tell-you>.

² John Horgan, ‘Robert Maire Smyllie,’ *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009). Available at <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.008164.v1>.

³ Brian Inglis, *West Briton* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 53.

⁴ Todd Andrews, *Man of No Property* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2001), 138, cited in Mark O’Brien, *The Irish Times: A History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 82.

that 'I am delighted that I can be an Irish Republican and a British what-have-you at one and the same time. It is quite fun' (53).⁵ To understand *Cruiskeen Lawn* it is necessary to understand *The Irish Times* as edited and transformed into an ex-Unionist journal of the Irish Free State by Smyllie. As the centre of Dublin's Palace Bar Set, where the city's best known painters, dramatists, and writers gathered with many of its journalists, professionals, and civil servants, Smyllie bridged the gap between a fading but influential Anglo-Irish ruling class and the incoming Catholic professional elite. He was a champion of James Joyce and, with the encouragement of his assistant editor Alec Newman, he opened the pages of *The Irish Times* to writers such as Patrick Kavanagh, Donagh MacDonagh, and Valentin Iremonger who did not fit the usual mould of Trinity-educated Protestants.⁶

As the editor who commissioned *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Smyllie deserves a far more prominent place in O'Nolan studies than has yet been acknowledged. The Palace Bar Set, described by Inglis as Europe's last 'Café Littéraire,' was where O'Nolan emerged as a mature writer.⁷ According to John Garvin, the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* was celebrated there (135), and given that this pub was where O'Nolan met Smyllie and Newman, the *Cruiskeen Lawn* column likely originated in the Palace Bar.⁸ The central role of Smyllie in his literary career may explain why O'Nolan's second published novel, *An Béal Bocht*, bears the dedication: 'Do mo chara / R.M. SMYLLIE / R. M. Ó SMAOILLE / .i. / AN SMAOLACH / tairgim an leabhar seo.'⁹ Accounts of the Palace Bar Set depict a witty, sharp-edged and absurdist intellectual culture which seeps through O'Nolan's early novels and journalism. For example, *The Irish Times* staffer Lionel Fleming describes finding Smyllie and Alec Newman 'talking a great deal of nonsense about a book which had just appeared; Dunn's [sic] "Experiment in Time",' with Newman countering Smyllie's objections to hiring Fleming by reminding him about the existence of 'different planes of perception' and 'the possibilities of precognition.'¹⁰ These reported conversations in the Palace Bar ring similarly to mock-scientific and philosophical theories in *Cruiskeen Lawn* or footnotes in *The Third Policeman*.

Richardson's *Smyllie's Ireland* is therefore a welcome development for O'Nolan studies as its focus begins to shift towards O'Nolan's network of collaborators. As his

⁵ Citing *The Irish Times* (25 April 1953): 7.

⁶ Terence Brown, *Irish Times: 150 Years of Influence* (London: Continuum, 2015), 175.

⁷ Inglis, *West Briton*, 50.

⁸ John Garvin, 'Sweetscented Manuscripts,' in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen)*, ed. Timothy O'Keeffe (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1973), 58.

⁹ 'To my friend / R.M. SMYLLIE / R. M. Ó SMAOILLE / that is / AN SMAOLACH / I offer this book.' Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Dublin: Mercier, 1999), front matter.

¹⁰ Lionel Fleming, *Head or Harp* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1965), 117-19.

title suggests, Richardson does not exactly offer a biographical account of Smyllie. His book is focalised on Smyllie primarily in the sense of his southern Irish Protestant identity. In Richardson's own words, the 'book is an attempt to tell a different story about southern Irish Protestants. Instead of highlighting the group's failures, it explores their successes. Rather than focusing on alienation, it emphasizes integration' (7), and

rather than a biography, this book should be read as microhistory, or perhaps even as a series of microhistories. The reader might notice that Smyllie disappears, for pages at a time, from the narrative that follows; this is deliberate, and it is an indication that *Smyllie's Ireland* is a book about a much wider group of people than its eponymous subject. (13)

Smyllie is chosen because he 'does not fit the "decline and fall" model: he is one of those who "made it" in independent Ireland' (7). The book proceeds chronologically, dealing with Smyllie's childhood, youth and adult years in sequence, but its material is also organised to shed light on different aspects of the southern Protestant experience. It is thus divided into chapters that tell the story of Smyllie as it relates to southern Protestants in the plural, namely as 'Locals,' 'West Brits,' 'Continental,' 'Patrons,' 'Liberals,' 'Patriots,' 'Gael,' and finally, as the 'Anglo Irish.'

Richardson draws together the disparate existing accounts of Smyllie which are spread across first-hand memoirs by Todd Andrews and *The Irish Times* staffers Patrick Campbell, Lionel Fleming, and Brian Inglis, as well as the book-length studies of *The Irish Times* by Terence Brown and Mark O'Brien. All these accounts focus on Smyllie's tenure as editor, and so those familiar with them will be grateful for Richardson's first three chapters, which introduce valuable – sometimes startling – new material based on detailed archival research. 'Locals' describes Smyllie's early life and the life of his father, a Scottish printer who turned to journalism in Sligo and worked his way up to a position of influence as editor of the *Sligo Times*. This fascinating account of 'Smyllie Senior,' as Richardson, describes him, is organised around the claim that his conservative, Unionist politics were subordinated to a 'localism' that 'was a crucial part of southern Irish Protestant identity, as it was and continues to be to Irish identity generally' (18). The second chapter, 'West Brits,' presents Smyllie as an inmate of Ruhleben internment camp in Germany where subjects of the British Empire of all kinds, including British Germans, were held during World War One (Smyllie had been arrested whilst tutoring the son of an American businessman travelling in Germany). Richardson explores the social experiment that the camp became, in which he contends that a concept of 'Britishness' arose not as a political loyalty to the Empire but rather as a common code of ethics for nationalities from around the world. The chapter narrates

within this setting Smyllie's career at the camp as a sports player, actor, co-writer of a comedy sketch about two Irishmen returning home from the camp called 'The Night of the Wake' (51), and, most surprisingly, as a teacher of beginner's Irish classes. Smyllie was even 'elected *uachtarán* of An Cummann Eireannach,' the camp's 'Irish Section' which, Richardson records, 'kept its Irish name but adopted the slightly grander English title of "Irish Literary and Historical Circle"' (50). These details draw out unexpected links between the Protestant Unionist Smyllie and the Catholic nationalist O'Nolan, helping to explain *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *An Béal Bocht*'s tribute to 'An Smaolach.' In 'Continental' we learn of Smyllie's two visits to Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and, for this reviewer at least, the surprising fact that Smyllie published the articles he wrote about Czechoslovakia in the 'Nichevo' column as two book-length studies: 1938's *Carpathian Contrasts* and 1942's *Carpathian Days* (76 n54). Smyllie's interest in Czech culture in its postwar transition from the rule of Austria-Hungary to independence throws light on the web of cultural connections that led O'Nolan, under the direction of Hilton Edwards, to adapt *The Insect Play* in 1942.¹¹ One comes away from reading these first three chapters with a heightened sense of Smyllie's importance as a cultural figure and of the importance of his connections to O'Nolan.

In subsequent chapters, material which is more widely known to Irish studies is re-explored in the frame of Richardson's focus on southern Irish Protestant identity. 'Patrons' provides detailed accounts of the Palace Bar Set, a synthesis of memoirs that usefully names more than two dozen participants in the coterie (82), and of the Set's manifestation in the literary pages of *The Irish Times* as an alliance of Protestants and Catholics who rebelled against conservative cultural mores and social policies. Examining the debate over the banning of Eric Cross's novel, *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942), 'Liberals' veers away from Smyllie but demonstrates the rich potential of Seanad debate transcripts for literary and cultural research into the censorship debate. 'Patriots' continues this detour with its interesting discussions of wartime reports sent to the British Ministry of Information by the Anglo-Irish Protestants, Frank Pakenham and Elizabeth Bowen. 'Gaels' shows Richardson's willingness to critically challenge the stability of the 'southern Irish Protestant' category, writing in its introduction that '[perhaps] the most controversial claim one can make about southern Irish Protestants is that they are not all that different from southern Catholics' (131). This chapter, along those lines, subsequently discusses the Anglo-Irish influences on *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the connections between Smyllie and O'Nolan that led to their decades-long cohabitation of *The Irish Times*. Here, Richardson draws out the similarities in Smyllie

¹¹ See Hilton Edwards, 'Shaw, Ibsen and Sybil Thorndyke,' *Commentary* 2, no. 3 (March 1943): 9.

and O’Nolan’s attitudes to Irish language policy and the latent collaboration between early *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns and editorials written by Smyllie. When Richardson turns to more general statements about the pairing, such as ‘[it] was not easy for Smyllie to represent the southern Protestant minority’s perspective; it was no easier for O’Nolan to criticize the institutions of a country he believed in profoundly’ (146), the argument of the book begins to buckle, ever so slightly, under the heavy weight of its focus on ‘southern Irish Protestants.’ Richardson must interrogate the relationship between Smyllie, of Scottish Presbyterian stock, and O’Nolan, who could be described (though Richardson does not) as a ‘northern Irish Catholic,’ through the lens of an opposition between southern Irish Protestants and Catholic communities. However, Smyllie and O’Nolan transcend and undermine such ethno-religious categories, both in terms of their family origins and through their writing. This chapter could have valuably spent more time on the role of Irish Protestants of the previous generation in Irish nationalist politics and Revivalism as a context for Smyllie and O’Nolan.

The final chapter, ‘Anglo-Irish,’ is an exploration of Smyllie’s social scene away from the Palace Bar. He lived for much of his adult life in Pembroke West, an Anglo-Irish enclave which Richardson describes somewhat cavalierly as ‘a kind of refugee camp for southern Irish Protestants’ (149). Smyllie was an ubiquitous figure in Dublin society, combining his membership of the ‘Island Golf Club,’ home of the aristocratic Protestant set in Malahide (161), with participation in every conceivable cultural interest group or club, including, for example: ‘Sorooptimists, members of the Tomorrow Club, Irish Auctioneers and Estate Agents, Irish Motor Traders, the Junior League of Nations Society, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [...] the 32nd Dublin Company of the Boys Brigade, [...] the Presbyterian Musical Society, [and] the Dublin Scottish Benevolent Society of St Andrew’ (158). Indeed, Smyllie’s multifarious titles and social engagements suggest he may have inspired the clubbable persona of *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s Sir Myles na gCopaleen. This chapter also describes the important role of Smyllie’s wife, Kathlyn Reid (they married in 1925 and, similarly to Brian and Evelyn O’Nolan, had no children),¹² as ‘a vital force, planning events, organizing fundraisers, and often standing in for Smyllie when the responsibilities of his editorship became too much’ (160). The role of women as social organisers, Richardson says, makes Anglo-Irish establishment society ‘one of the least sexist places in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s’ (160).

This book is an invaluable analysis of Smyllie and should be read widely in Irish studies and beyond. Richardson also succeeds in turning an unprecedented level of attention towards underexplored aspects of southern Irish Protestant identity in this

¹² Horgan, ‘Robert Maire Smyllie,’ *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.

period. If adverse criticism is to be made, then it is that *Smyllie's Ireland* relies a little too much for its rhetorical power on an argument which those with some familiarity of the Irish colonial scenario could argue is a strawman. Yes, Smyllie's career disproves the imaginary political notion that the events of 1916–1922 immediately installed a Catholic elite in place of the Protestant establishment, entailing a majoritarian Catholic cultural hegemony that successfully marginalised Protestant identity. The truth, as Richardson ably demonstrates, is much more nuanced and interesting: although many Protestants did leave Ireland, the social standing of wealthy Protestants and their institutions was not extinguished in 1922. It would be possible to state this conclusion at the outset rather than begin with the emotive words: 'What do you do when your country has left you behind?' (1). But that is a matter of critical style. Richardson, in an enjoyable and rigorous work where scholarship shares place with an exuberant and occasionally provocative prose style, creates ample grounds for a turn towards Smyllie and the Palace Bar Set as an important new frontier in O'Nolan scholarship.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

