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## Flannagain in Far Amurikey: Report on the Sixth International Flann O'Brien Conference, Boston College, 6-9 April 2022

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Joseph Nugent reports on *Flannagain in Far Amurikey: VI International Flann O'Brien Conference*, Boston College, 6-9 April 2022.

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Long-awaited, much-postponed, fiercely anticipated: *Flannagain in Far Amurikey* saw the descent last April of Flann O'Brien's scholars and followers onto the shores of the New World. The location was Boston, the organisers, librarian extraordinaire Christian Dupont and Flannorak-in-chief Professor Joe Nugent, and the occasion, the Sixth International Flann O'Brien Conference (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 1** Official conference trailer for *Flannagain in Far Amurikey: VI International Flann O'Brien Conference*, Boston College, 6–9 April 2022, courtesy of Liam Weir. Available at [https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.bc.edu/dist/8/90/files/2021/11/Flannagain\\_-In-Far-Amurikey-Trailer-1.mp4](https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.bc.edu/dist/8/90/files/2021/11/Flannagain_-In-Far-Amurikey-Trailer-1.mp4).

The shenanigans kicked off on Wednesday the 9<sup>th</sup> with a splendid reception in the grand gothic surroundings of Boston College's Burns Library. Under the original portrait of The Great Man by Mícheál Ó Nualláin, Flannoraks from many parts were treated to a sonorous enumeration of Finn MacCool's attributes by theatre director David Gullette. The proceedings now definitively declared open, drinks firmly in hand, we tottered off to a packed Irish Room for the opening lecture by award-winning author and O'Brien devotee, Kevin Barry, hotfoot from New York where his first Broadway play is in preparation.

Thursday morning and over with us to the opulence of Connolly House, headquarters of BC's Irish Studies Program. There, under the stained-glass eye of St Patrick, a triumvirate of Andrew Kuhn, Dominic Harkin, and Stanley Gontarski presented the first of our panels: 'Dineen, Decadence, and Diaspora.' Next, and 3,000 miles from his *Irish Times* column, Frank McNally entertained us all with the first keynote address, lavishly entitled 'The Hiberno-Nolan Dictionary of Insult: Usage and Abusage in Ireland's First Unofficial Language.' A capacious lunch to follow and, post-prandially, Oisín Ó

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<sup>1</sup> Visit the official conference website at <https://sites.bc.edu/flannobriensix/>.

Nualláin (yes, of that ilk) and super-sidekick Deirdre Learmont regaled us with tales of the grip that the Gortahork Gaeltacht held on the young lad from Strabane.

On the far side of BC's beautiful campus that afternoon, Christian Dupont conjured up from his underground lair the splendors of BC's Flann archives. Lucky Flanneurs saw, held, and handled the goods – the perfect fountain pen, the contentious passport, the tattered overcoat, the (suspiciously pristine) hat, the battered typewriter... and those notebooks, fair copies, and first editions that left us dazzled. Wondrous. Energetic performance by the HCE Players left barely enough time to finish our lobster rolls before being whisked off to the oddities of The Club of Odd Volumes, a fabulous place of signs and wonders, grand books, fine whiskey, cigar smoke, and colorful gentlemen. A memorable night.

The technological trio of Elliott Mills, Joe LaBine, and German Asensio Peral ushered in our Friday with disquisitions on the theme of 'Wireless, TV, and the Rising Tide.' The estimable Maebh Long (University of Waikato) presented her keynote 'Listening to Brian O'Nolan,' and startled her audience by permitting them to do just that with never-before-heard recordings of himself in full vocality. 'Fraudulence, Fisticuffs, and Vendettas' were the stuff of the following panel's contribution with Tom O'Grady, Joseph LaBine, and the duo of Learmont and Ó Nualláin at it again. This very Gaelic day continued with a showing of Tom Collins's animated adaptation of *An Béal Bocht* followed by an Gaeilgeoir uasal sin, Manchán Magan who revealed in one sparkling performance the wealth of the Irish language and the secrets of Irish soda bread. More beer agus craic followed at the Conference Cookout in the shady grounds of Connolly House.

Saturday opened odiferously with 'Skins, Species, and Sewer Gas' on offer from Holly Schaaf, Therese Cox, and the venerable Paul Fagan, head bottlewasher of all things Flannish. Catherine Flynn (University of California, Berkeley) then electrified the atmosphere with her measured keynote on the subject of 'Flann O'Brien and the Young Irish State.' Well lunched (as ever), we turned to more solemn issues. Columnist and historian Fintan O'Toole with Frank McNally and journalist Charlie Sennott debated O'Brien's quivering stance on the ethical issues posed by war in his day as they looked eastward at wars once more raging in Europe in our own time.

Then, following a circuitous route via the exhibition of Irish photographs by the great Martin Parr, we arrived in awe at the conference finale. *The Third Policeman's Ball* took place in surroundings worthy of MacCruiskeen himself: the Boston Waterworks Museum. Among the flywheels and pistons of this steampunk cathedral, the assembled Flannites led throngs of onlookers to launch O'Toole's *We Don't Know Ourselves*, the lot accompanied by Irish dance, music, songs, refreshments and much much laughter

(Fig. 2). And who funded these spectacular events? Time to acknowledge the Irish Dept of Foreign Affairs, the Consulate-General in Boston, the Irish Studies Program, the Burns Library, and Boston College's Institute of the Liberal Arts. Many thanks to them all.



**Fig. 2** Conference delegates at the 'Third Policeman's Ball,' closing gala reception in partnership with Consulate General of Ireland in Boston at the Waterworks Museum. Image courtesy of Joseph Nugent, Boston College.

Retrospective judgement? An outstanding success. There had been sleepless nights as the conference approached: would the Flanneurs come? Would America let them in? Would Covid let them out? Would our keynotes brave it? Might it all fall through? It didn't – four unforgettable keynote addresses, twelve exciting papers, one hundred and forty registrants, and forty universities represented. More ideas floated, contacts made, friendships renewed, memories made, and laughs had than you could count. Yes, a good day's work was done. Want to know more? Click [HERE](#) (Fig. 3) for a short reprise of the entire affair!



**Fig. 3** 'Flannagain: In Far Amurikey Recap,' Video Recap of *Flannagain in Far Amurikey: VI International Flann O'Brien Conference*, Boston College, 6-9 April 2022. Courtesy of Liam Weir. Available at <https://vimeo.com/709337692/3a16bb448f>.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author was the co-organiser and co-host of *Flannagain in Far Amurikey: VI International Flann O'Brien Conference*, Boston College, 6–9 April 2022.

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