

JOURNEY  
PLANET

**A HALF-PINT  
OF ~~PLAIN~~ Flann**

FANZINE

FANZINE

JAMES BACON  
MICHAEL CARROLL  
CHRIS GARCIA  
PÁDRAIG Ó MÉALÓID

Issue 43 of the award-winning fanzine!

COMPLETE



UNABRIDGED

# JOURNEY PLANET

## Issue 43

### Table of Contents

Introduction by Pádraig Ó Méalóid.....	3
Introduction by James Bacon.....	5
Mise agus Myles.....	6
Extractum Ó Bhark i bPrágrais.....	11
Object Found in a Book I:.....	23
Flannland.....	25
The Case for John Shamus O'Donnell.....	28
Off the Rails – Flann on Track.....	39
Object Found in a Book II:.....	53
Single Narrow Gold Band: Flann's Pen.....	62
The Cardinal and/or the Corpse:.....	65
Miscellanea.....	77
Selected Bibliography.....	79

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# Introduction by Pádraig Ó Méalóid

Don't get me wrong now, it's not that I'm ungrateful, you understand. I mean, I've loved the work of Flann O'Brien since I was a teenager. But when James Bacon suggested that, from scratch, we put together a bijou Flann fanzine (a Flannzine, if you will) in a week, I had no idea how much work it was going to present.

I appear to have been slowly subsumed into the broader editorial pool at *Journey Planet*, which is not a bad thing to happen, all things considered. But I am more the slow and methodical type, given to thinking about a subject for at least six months before beginning to write about it, and then doing multiple drafts, to the point where I sometimes lose track of which one is the one I most recently worked on, causing several parallel versions to exist, and sometimes even see print—something which is very much the case with any of the pieces herein written by me: if they appeared before, then this current version is a different version to that one.

James's own piece for this publication, his first fingerings of the giant opus of railwayana that Flann produced, is more like that tiny piece of an iceberg that protrudes above the surface of the sea, both an indication of more to come, and a mighty size of a thing in itself. James's writing style has always fascinated me, a sort of hybrid staccato stream of consciousness that conveys meaning, but strongly suggests that we're only understanding a fraction of what he's trying to tell us, and to see him get to grips with a particular subject which he knows and loves, and which he is mining out of the work of a writer who he knows and loves, is mesmerising indeed.

Jack Fennell offers us an insight into his suggesting that Flann O'Brien might have written a short science fiction tale under a as yet unknown pseudonym, which considerably adds to the body of speculation about that story. Jack and I are friends, and this particular story, and its putative authorship, is a topic we've discussed with much satisfaction before, and hopefully will again.

Val Nolan's brief glimpse at his as yet unwritten novel, *Flannland*, is illuminating stuff, and certainly makes me wish to see him get back to it one of these days, so that I can actually read it. God knows, things sometimes take time, but I urge him to give it some further thought, for the good of all mankind.

It is all too easy to get so caught up in one's subject, and to go off on flights of fancy so rarefied that you leave no room for the beginner, or the casual reader. And this is why I particularly welcomed the inclusion here of Johan Anglemark's piece, which surely illustrates something the rest of us nearly forgot to mention, which is how Flann O'Brien's work first presented it to us, and how we were immediately captivated by it.

Lastly—est, but definitely not leastly—est, a crucial component in this offering of ours, and the one that made me sure we would actually reach our deadline, and not go over it, was the fact that Michael Carroll was going to be doing the job of putting all those bits and pieces together, and making them look lovely. Michael has skills at creating covers that would surely have seen him burnt at the stake in less enlightened times, a fate I hope he manages to avoid at least until he gets this issue finished. He created the cover of my own



book, the recently published and egregiously over-abundantly titled *Poisoned Chalice: The Extremely Long and Incredibly Complex Story of Marvelman (and Miracleman)*, which I am convinced is the main reason that people are buying it. If we all look good here, then it's all due to him.

If not, blame James...



# Introduction by James Bacon

Welcome to this 'Flann Primer.' There's a lot of celebration going on about Flann O'Brien in the next year and to start you thinking, we set about doing a 'primer of Flann'. The idea being it would illicit more writings about Flann or his works which we here at *Journey Planet* will welcome and gather for a future issue in 2019.

2019 will mark 80 years since the publication of *At Swim Two Birds*, it will see a Flann O'Brien conference in Dublin and The World Science Fiction Convention also in Dublin. There's quite a bit of the old synchronicity going on here, and so, a fannish endeavour about Flann seemed appropriate and amongst us, we have managed to come by some exceptional good bits. I'm grateful to our contributors, and very pleased that Jack, Johan and Val could get us items in such short notice.

Padraig, who co-edited this issue, is an astute writer on and scholar of Flann. He has had a few bits published and has researched many angles and elements of unique interest, while Michael produced a wonderful cover, and then given the crushing workload Chris was under came on board as co-editor.

I often do not know what Brian O'Nolan would have made of us. Maybe he'd be ok if we were buying him a few pints, and I might get some currency as a train driver, but I also think he'd be liable to give us abuse and tell us where to go.

His genius is visible. I went to see *Thirst* in the Peacock theatre and it was very good, indicative of the timelessness in a way of the work and its accessibility.

Indeed the more I read of *Railway Matters* in the *Irish Times*, as per Flann, the more I'm convinced he was a progressive forward-looking train fan who actually cared about maintenance and efficiency.

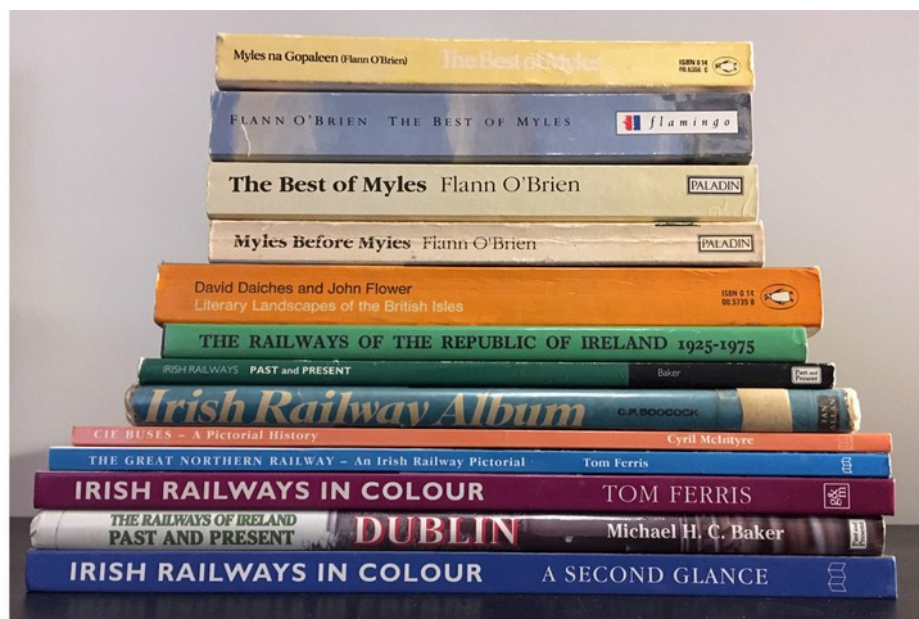
The the thing, there's great sense and humour in the word play and chaos!

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Do read *The Third Policeman* as a first into the fiction and *The Best of Myles* for journalism. Pull up a chair, have a drink and get ready for some blather.

Best, James.

*Right: a glimpse into James's mind... Flann O'Brien and trains. (If only these books were made of Lego...)*



# Mise agus Myles

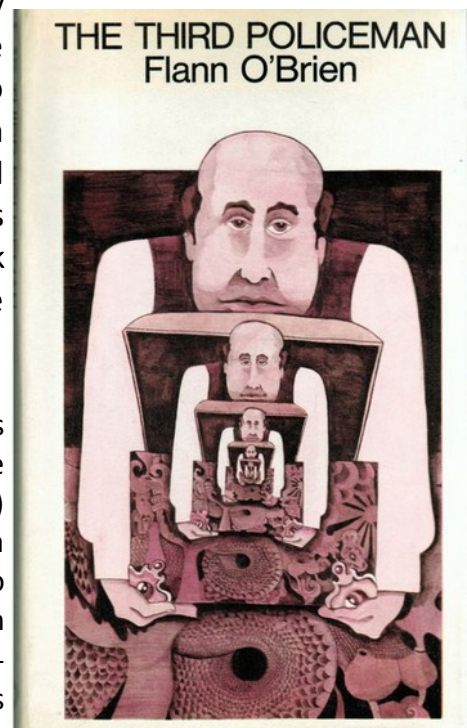
## Johan Anglemark

Brian O’Nolan wrote both as Flann O’Brien and as Myles na gCopaleen, and used the Irish version of his name, Brian Ó Nualláin, in formal contexts. I will refer to him using his birth name.

O’Nolan was not a happy man, being mostly unlucky in his career as a writer and with alcoholism gradually destroying his health. He seems also to have had problems with life-long depression and low self-esteem. However, to me he has always given great enjoyment ever since I was introduced to him as a student here at Uppsala University by Bertie, my tutor in Irish (I will forever be indebted to you for that, Bertie).

O’Nolan as a writer had several talents, all of which make him dear to me. He was an avant-garde prose writer, he was a supreme fabulist, and he was a brilliant humorist and satirist. He mastered both Irish and English perfectly (when it comes to his mastery of Irish I have to trust the opinions of others, I have never progressed far enough to read anything more than the simplest text fluently). For a science fiction fan, there is something distinctly sfnal about his imagination. For example, in O’Nolan’s posthumous novel *The Third Policeman* (possibly the work by O’Nolan that every sf fan must read), we have the natural philosopher de Selby:

[...] all the commentators have treated de Selby’s disquisitions on night and sleep with considerable reserve. This is hardly to be wondered at since he held (a) that darkness was simply an accretion of ‘black air’, i.e., a staining of the atmosphere due to volcanic eruptions too fine to be seen with the naked eye and also to certain ‘regrettable’ industrial activities involving coal-tar by-products and vegetable dyes; and (b) that sleep was simply a succession of fainting-fits brought on by semi-asphyxiation due to (a).



What I immediately came to love was the humour and the science-fictional. I was just over twenty years old and knew very little of Ireland and its cultural history. Bertie, I think, loved him more for his keen satirical eye and his love of the Irish language, which came together in some newspaper columns, but also in the novel *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*), a brilliant spoof on an entire genre of books in Irish by self-taught Irish country people lamenting the hard life growing up in Irish-speaking Ireland of old. These books had long been held up as mandatory reading for all Irishmen and Irishwomen, and O’Nolan was sick of them all.

During his lifetime, O’Nolan the novelist was mostly forgotten. What people read by

him was his columns in the *Irish Times*. As I just wrote, which you will remember if you have managed to read this far in one go, or if you have a very good memory, I love all aspects of O’Nolan the writer. But now I will gush over the punster, the wit and the columnist, not the genius novelist. Many of O’Nolan’s columns in the *Irish Times* made a strong impression on me as a fan-writer. I never tried to emulate him, but they were just up my alley. The first compilation of columns that I got my hand on is called *The Best of Myles*, originally published in 1968, just a couple of years after O’Nolan passed away. It contains a *smörgåsbord* of O’Nolan’s funniest columns, arranged thematically. One of the first samples is a series of columns inspired by the German word for bookshop—*buchhandlung*.

I noticed on my visit [to a newly-married friend] that not one of [his books] had ever been opened or touched, and remarked the fact.

‘When I get settled down properly,’ said the fool, ‘I’ll have to catch up on my reading.’

This is what set me thinking. Why should a wealthy person like this be put to the trouble of pretending to read at all? Why not a professional book-handler to go in and suitably maul his library for so-much per shelf? Such a person, if properly qualified, could make a fortune.

He then goes on to sketch this ‘book-handling’ business:

Similarly with our non-brow who wants his friends to infer from glancing around his house that he is a high-brow. He buys an enormous book on the Russian ballet, written possibly in the language of that distant but beautiful land. Our problem is to alter the book in a reasonably short time so that anybody looking at it will conclude that its owner has practically lived, supped, and slept with it for many months.

There are all kinds of treatments, ranging from the cheap to the very luxurious:

Popular Handling—Each volume to be well and truly handled, four leaves in each to be dog-eared, and a tram ticket, cloakroom docket, or other comparable article inserted in each as a forgotten mark. Say, £1 7s 6d. Five per cent discount for civil servants.

Premier handling—Each volume to be thoroughly handled, eight leaves in each to be dog-eared, a suitable passage in not less than 25 volumes to be underlined in red pencil, and a leaflet in French on the works of Victor Hugo to be inserted as a forgotten book mark in each. Say, £2 17s 6d. Five per cent discount for literary university students, civil servants and lady social workers.

and so on to *Le Traitement Superbe*:

Every volume to be well and truly handled, first by a qualified handler and subsequently by a master-handler who shall have to his credit not less than 550 handling hours; suitable passages in not less than fifty per cent of the books to be underlined in good-quality red ink and an appropriate phrase from the following list inserted in the margin, viz:

*Rubbish!*



*Yes, indeed!*  
*How true, how true!*  
*I don't agree at all.*  
*Why?*  
*Yes, but cf. Homer, Od., iii, 151.*  
*Well, well, well.*  
*Quite, but Boussuet in his Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle has already established the same point and given much more forceful explanations.*  
*Nonsense, nonsense!*  
*A point well taken!*  
*But why in heaven's name?*  
*I remember poor Joyce saying the very same thing to me.*

[....]

'Not less than six volumes to be inscribed with forged messages of affection and gratitude from the author of each work, eg,

'Well, A.B., both of us are getting on. I am supposed to be a good writer now, but I am not old enough to forget the infinite patience you displayed in the old days when guiding my young feet on the path of literature. Accept this further book, poor as it may be, and please believe that I remain, as ever, your friend and admirer, G. Bernard Shaw.'

'From your devoted friend and follower, K. Marx.'

'Dear A.B., – Your invaluable suggestions and assistance, not to mention your kindness, in entirely re-writing chapter 3, entitles you, surely, to this first copy of Tess. From your old friend T. Hardy.'

This is good stuff. I must have spent countless hours imagining how to write similar stuff for a fanzine. This was before I was acquainted with the late lamented Walt Willis, whose best writing indeed reached the same heights as O'Nolan's. The whole concept also intrigued me, and I toyed with the notion of starting a similar project to the book handling.

Another set of columns consisted of elaborate, often highly literate, puns involving fictionalised versions of the poets John Keats and George Chapman. Like this one, possibly my favourite of them all:

Chapman once fell in love and had not been long plying his timid attentions when it was brought to his notice that he had a rival. This rival, a ferocious and burly character, surprised Chapman in the middle of a tender conversation with the lady and immediately challenged him to a duel, being, as he said, prohibited from breaking him into pieces there and then merely by the presence of the lady.

Chapman, who was no duelist, went home and explained what had happened to Keats.

'And I think he means business', he added. 'I fear it is a case of 'pistols for two, coffee for one'. Will you be my second?'

'Certainly.' Keats said, 'and since you have the choice of weapons I think you should



choose swords rather than pistols.'

Chapman agreed. The rendezvous was duly made and one morning at dawn Keats and Chapman drove in a cab to the dread spot. The poet had taken the 'coffee for one' remark rather too literally and had brought along a small quantity of coffee, sugar, milk, a coffee-pot, a cup, saucer and spoon, together with a small stove and some paraffin.

After the usual formalities, Chapman and the rival fell to sword play. The two men fought fiercely, edging hither and tither about the sward. Keats, kneeling and priming the stove, was watching anxiously and saw that his friend was weakening. Suddenly, Chapman's guard fell and his opponent drew back to plunge his weapon home. Keats, with a lightning flick of his arm took up the stove and hurled it at the blade that was poised to kill! With such force and aim so deadly was the stove hurled that it smashed the blade in three places. Chapman was saved!

The affair ended in bloodless recriminations. Chapman was warm in his thanks to Keats.

'You saved my life,' he said, 'by hurling the stove between our blades. You're tops!'

'Primus inter parries,' Keats said.

That is a typical Keats and Chapman story, long, elaborate, winding and ending with a pun to make you groan loudly. Another one that is considerably shorter:

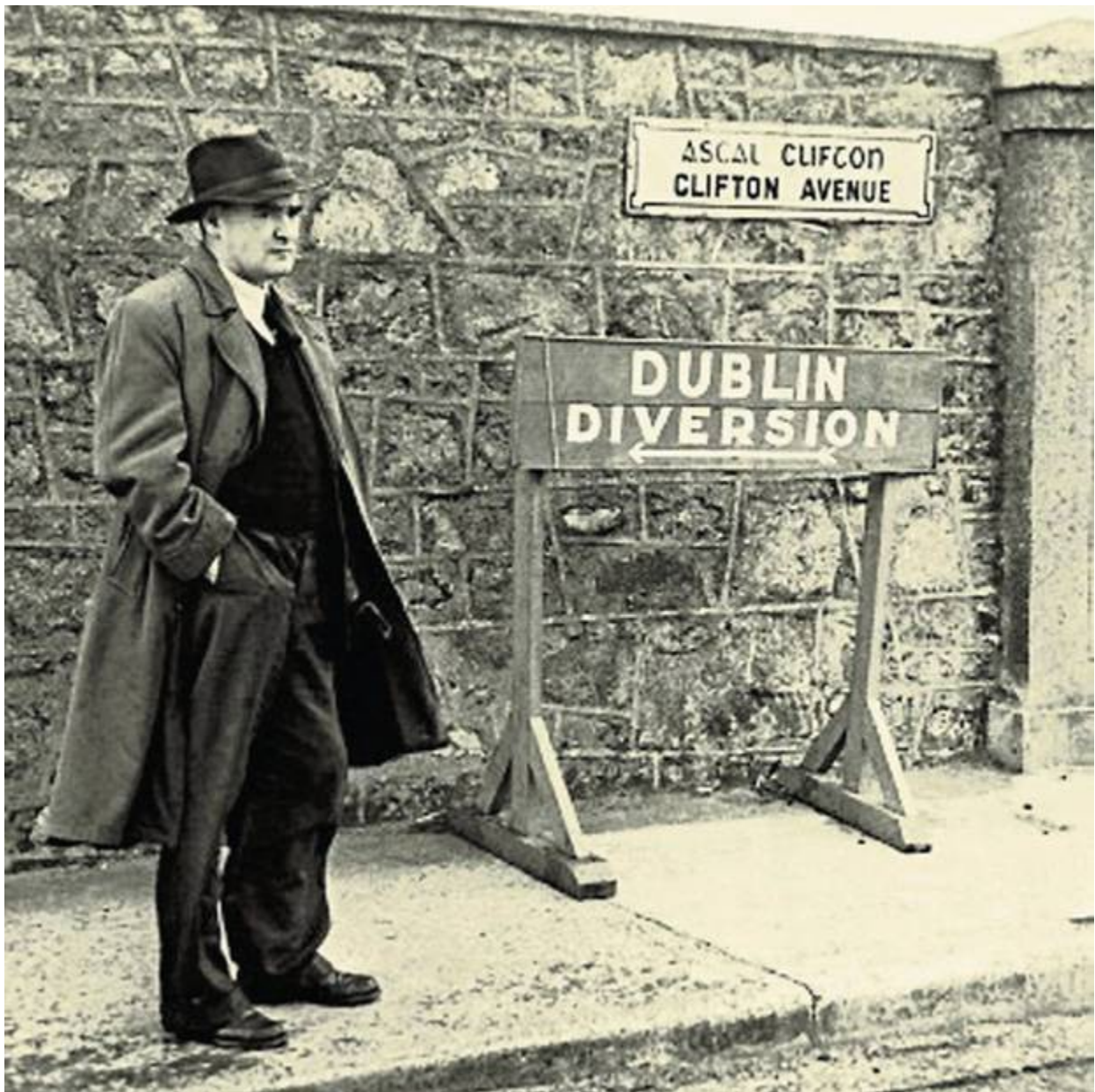
Keats was once presented with an Irish terrier, which he humorously named Byrne. One day the beast strayed from the house and failed to return at night. Everybody was distressed, save Keats himself. He reached reflectively for his violin, a fairly passable timber of the Stradivarius feciture, and was soon at work with chin and jaw.

Chapman, looking in for an after-supper pipe, was astonished at the poet's composure, and did not hesitate to say so. Keats smiled (in a way that was rather lovely).

'And why should I not fiddle,' he asked, 'while Byrne roams.'

There are countless more gems in these columns, and immortal characters, like 'The Brother' and 'The Plain People of Ireland'. I certainly wish that O'Nolan had had a happier life. When he died, he had long been ill and his drinking had put a stop to his professional career as a civil servant. On April Fool's Day 1966 when he died, he was a few months younger than myself at the time of writing this. That's hard to fathom.

Now I have to take out *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* from their shelves and put them in my TBR pile once more. It's far too many years now since I last read them. What I do have already in the TBR pile, as of a couple of months back, is Maebh Long's *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, which I look forward to reading. It has met with mixed reviews, mainly because O'Nolan as a letter writer was apparently not half as funny or interesting as he was as a novelist or a columnist. Small wonder if he wasn't, the great humorists are seldom especially funny off-stage.



*Writer Flann O'Brien contemplates the mysteries of the universe.*

# Extractum Ó Bhark i bPrágrais (A Flann O'Brien A to Z)

Interim Version II

Pádraig Ó Méalóid

B

*[A note on nomenclature: Flann O'Brien had a number of different names he went by, even including his own original name, Brian Nolan, and versions thereof. Although it may look as if I've just used different ones purely at my whim throughout this, that is not actually the case. The name used is usually relevant to the topic at hand. Usually.]*

*And a note on the work in general: Probably the seed of all this is the piece about the Birds in **At Swim-Two-Birds**—I wanted to write it, but felt it was too obscure to stand alone. And I had been toying with the idea of trying to write a book about Flann O'Brien, if I could find an original way of doing so. And, finally, I really do like a list, especially if it's alphabetical or chronological. So this is a partial chapter from that putative book, which is deliberately unfinished, at the moment. They may be more than just the Bs, or there may not. If it comes to pass, I'll finish writing all those [to be written] entries then. Ask me about it in a few years' time!*

*A previous version of this work i.e. **Interim Version I**, appeared elsewhere. This version now supersedes that.]*



*Above: Ryan, Cronin, Nolan, Kavanagh, and Joyce at Sandymount Strand, 16 June 1954*

**Bailey, The:** A public house on Duke Street, just off the fashionable Grafton Street on the south side of Dublin's city centre. It was the finishing point of the first Bloomsday commemoration, on 16 June 1954, although the participants - Anthony Cronin, Tom Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, Brian Nolan, and John Ryan—had intended to go further, presumably as far as 7 Eccles Street, the fictional residence of Leopold Bloom on the other side of the

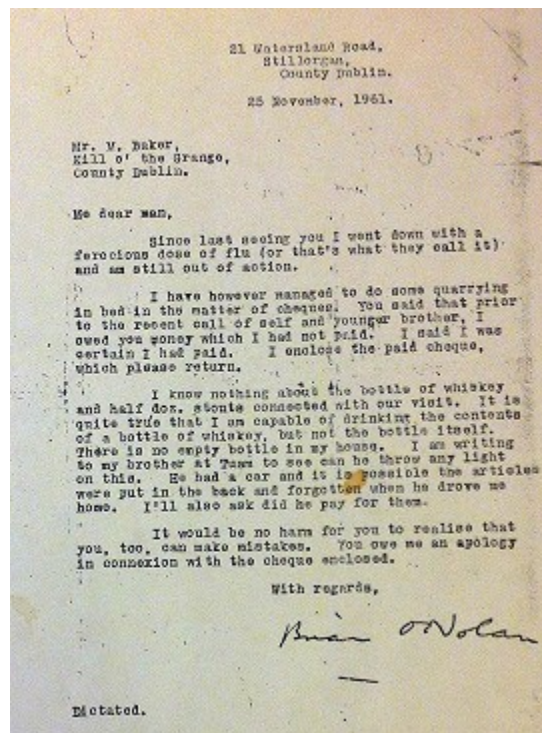
River Liffey, but were too overtaken by drink to get any further.

John Ryan bought The Bailey in 1957 and, ten years later, installed therein the front door of 7 Eccles Street on Bloomsday 1967, having bought it from the Dominicans Sisters, who were having the property demolished. The door has since moved back across the river to the James Joyce Centre in North Great George's Street, where it can still be seen.

*See also:* Bloomsday; Cronin, Anthony; Dublin; Joyce, James; Joyce, Tom; Kavanagh, Patrick; Nolan, Brian; Public Houses; Ryan, John; *Ulysses*

**Baker's Corner:** *see Baker's of Kill-O-The Grange*

**Baker's of Kill-O-The Grange:** A public house in Kill o' the Grange, in the area of Blackrock in County Dublin, colloquially known as Baker's Corner, which it was eventually renamed. On 25 November 1961 O'Nolan wrote to the proprietor thusly:



21 Watersland Road,  
Stillorgan,  
County Dublin.  
25 November, 1961.

Mr. W. Baker,  
Kill o' the Grange,  
County Dublin.

Me dear man,

Since last seeing you I went down with a ferocious dose of flu (or that's what they call it) and am still out of action.

I have however managed to do some quarrying in bed in the matter of cheques. You said that prior to the recent call of self and younger brother, I owed you money which I had not paid. I said I was certain I had paid. I enclose the paid cheque, which please return.

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. I am writing to my brother at Tuam to see can he throw any light on this. He had a car and it is possible the articles were put in the back and forgotten when he drove me home. I'll also ask did he pay for them.

It would be no harm for you to realise that you, too, can make mistakes. You owe me an apology in connexion with the cheque enclosed.

With regards,  
Brian O'Nolan

Dictated.

Me dear man,

Since last seeing you I went down with a ferocious dose of flu (or that's what they call it) and am still out of action.

I have however managed to do some quarrying in bed in the matter of cheques. You said that prior to the recent call of self and younger brother, I owed you money which I had not paid. I enclose the paid cheque, which please return.

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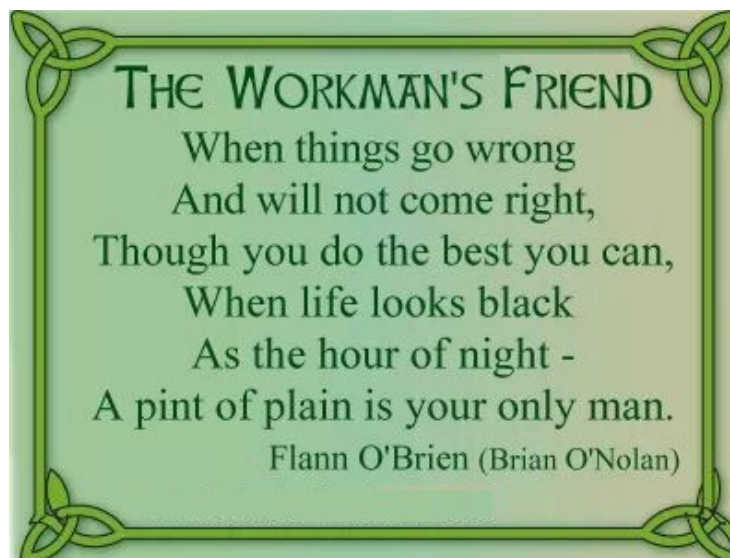


It would be no harm for you to realise that you, too, can make mistakes. You own me an apology in connection with the cheque enclosed.

*See also:* Public Houses

**Banned Books:** Flann always wanted to be banned, but never was, perhaps because, at heart, he was too strongly Catholic, and too repressed, to ever have written anything actually bannable. [*More to be written*]

**Bard of Booterstown, The:** Jem Casey, a character in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, is a parodic example of the Navvy Poet stereotype. Known as The Bard of Booterstown and The Poet of the Pick, Casey was the author of poems like *The Working Man* and *The Workman's Friend*, often misattributed as *A Pint of Plain is Your Only Man*, of which one verse will easily stand in for the whole:



*See also:* *At Swim-Two-Birds*; Jem Casey

**Barnabas, Brother:** *see* **Brother Barnabas**

**Barnacle, Nora:** Wife of James Joyce. On their first date, on 16 June 1904, they walked from Finn's Hotel on Leinster Street South, where she was then working, as far as Sandymount Strand, where she masturbated her husband-to-be, thereby setting up several key aspects of his 1922 novel, *Ulysses*, as well as one location for John Ryan and his associates to visit on their first Bloomsday expedition, and indeed to those of many subsequent Joyceans.



*See also:* Bloomsday; Joyce, James; Sandymount Strand; *Ulysses*

**Bars:** *see* **Public Houses**

**Bash in the Tunnel, A (book):** *see* **A Bash in the Tunnel (book)**

**Bash in the Tunnel, A (essay):** *see* **A Bash in the Tunnel (essay)**

**Basketweaving:** When he was interviewed by *Time* magazine, the resultant story included the following, about O’Nolan’s trip to Germany,

He also met and married 18-year-old Clara Ungerland, blonde, violin-playing daughter of a Cologne basketweaver. She died a month later. O’Nolan returned to Eire and never mentions her.

*See also:* Berlin; Germany; Cologne; Ungerland, Clara

**BBC:** According to the BBC’s Genome Project website, on Wednesday 18 April 1962, at 10pm, BBC TV’s *Bookstand* programme included a section with Flann O’Brien and Peter Duval Smith discussing O’Brien’s novels *The Hard Life* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*. No written record of this is to be found in the BBC Written Archives Centre, unfortunately.

Neither is there a written copy of a radio programme called *A Letter From Dublin by Myles na gCopaleen*, originally broadcast on the Third Programme on Tuesday 12 August 1952 at 9.05pm, which was rebroadcast three days later on 15 August 1952 at 6.20pm, but about which no other information seems to exist. Research is ongoing.

*See also:* *At Swim-Two-Birds*; *Hard Life*, *The*

**Beal Bocht, An:** More fully *An Béal Bocht, Nó, an Milleánach: Droch-Sgéal Ar an Droch-Shaoghal*. Most people miss that *An Milleánach* is a pun on Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s autobiography *An t-Oileánach*, though. O’Nolan’s only Irish language novel, published in 1941 by An Preas Náisiúnta (The National Press), under the name of Myles the gCopaleen. Translated (badly) into Irish in 1973 by Patrick C Power, and published as *The Poor Mouth* by Hart-Davis, MacGibbon of London in 1973. [*More to be written*]

**Beard:** Was she or wasn’t she? [*To be written*]

*See also:* O’Nolan, Evelyn

**Beckett, Samuel:** An Irishman abroad [*To be written*]

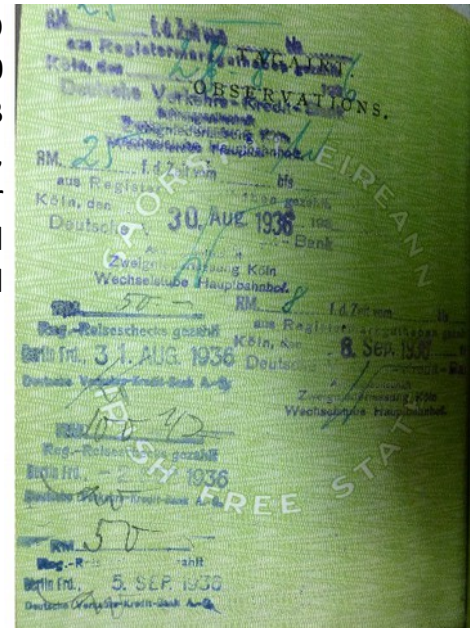
**Behan, Brendan:** Friend, fellow writer, drinking companion [*To be written*]



**Bell, The:** An Irish literary magazine founded and published by Seán Ó Faoláin in Dublin from 1940 to 1954. [*More to be written*]

**Berlin:** According to stamps in his passport, Brian Ó Nualláin cashed travellers cheques for RM50 (50 Reichsmark) in Deutsche Verkehrs-Kredit Bank (the DVB or German Traffic-credit Bank) on 31 August 1936, another for RM100 there on 2 September, and a further RM50 there on 5 September. Cheques were also cashed for RM25 in the DVB in Cologne on 28 & 30 August, and for RM8 on 8 September, making a total of RM 258 in all.

*See also:* Cologne; Germany; Ungerland, Clara

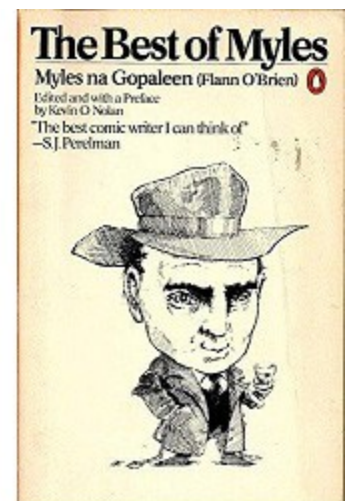


**Best of Myles, The:** A collection of mostly early articles from Myles na gCopaleen's Cruiskeen Lawn column in the *Irish Times*. First published by MacGibbon & Kee of London in 1968. [*More to be written*]

*See also:* Cologne; Cruiskeen Lawn; *Irish Times*; MacGibbon & Kee; Myles na gCopaleen; Myles na Gopaleen

**Bicycles:** Was it about a bicycle? [*To be written*]

**Bilingualism:** [*To be written*]



**Billiards:** In the Cruiskeen Lawn column for 2 March 1966, titled Graduate's Reverie, Myles wrote of his years at University College Dublin:

...what have I to show for five years of my life when I was young, alert and very healthy? [...] The only result my father got for his money was the certainly that his son had laid faultlessly the foundation of a system of heavy drinking and could be always relied on to make a break of at least 25 even with a bad cue.

*See also:* Alcoholism; Cruiskeen Lawn; University College Dublin

**Birds in At Swim-Two-Birds:** In Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (Longman Green & Co, London, 1939) one of the characters, Finn Mac Cool, says,

I am friend to the pilibeen, the red-necked chough, the parsnip land-rail, the pilibeen móna, the bottle-tailed tit, the common marsh-coot, the speckle-toed guillemot, the pilibeen sléibhe, the Mohar gannet, the peregrine plough-gull, the long-eared bush-owl, the Wicklow small-fowl, the bevil-beaked chough, the hooded tit, the pilibeen uisce, the common corby, the fish-tailed mud-piper, the cruiskeen lawn, the carrion sea-cock, the green-lidded parakeet, the brown bog-martin, the maritime wren, the dove-tailed wheatcrake, the beaded daw, the Galway hill-bantam and the pilibeen cathrach.

There are a number of interesting points here. Before I even get to them, though, I should point out that, with almost a single exception, none of these birds are real. Which is to say that, whilst gannets and gulls and owls undoubtedly do exist, they do not have variations called the Mohar gannet, or the peregrine plough-gull, or the long-eared bush-owl. And, whilst the carrion sea-cock sounds perfectly legitimate, a seacock is actually a kind of valve on the hull of a boat or ship, permitting water to flow into and out of the vessel, for taking in water to cool an engine, or for a sink or toilet outlet. It is likely that most of the names above could be broken down into more interesting sub-components, like cracking quarks out of atoms, but that is work for another day. Meanwhile, there are a few particular things I want to highlight here.

First on the list, and first in *that* list, there's the pilibeen, and variations thereon, being the pilibeen móna, pilibeen sléibhe, pilibeen uisce, and pilibeen cathrach. The pilibeen is presumably the pilibín, which is Irish for the lapwing, and the others are, respectively, the bog lapwing, mountain lapwing, water lapwing, and city lapwing. It is odd that Flann would choose an Anglicisation of the Irish name, but there are a few reasons why this might have been the case.



The first thing is, it allows him to insert another hidden joke. There was a long tradition amongst Irish writers, especially those writing in the Irish language, of using pseudonyms, and not just pseudonyms which exchanged one person's name for another, but usually more fanciful names like An Seabhac—The Hawk—used by Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha, or An Craoibhín Aoibhinn—The Pleasant Little Branch—as used by Douglas Hyde aka Dubhghlas de hÍde, later the first President of Ireland. One writer, John Hackett Pollock, wrote under the name of An Pilibín, The Lapwing (and indeed wrote such bird-related works as *The Valley of the Wild Swans* (Talbot Press, Dublin, 1932), *Mount Kestrel* (MH Gill, Dublin, 1945), and *The Lost Nightingale* (HR Carter, Belfast, 1951)).

This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that, according to Anthony Cronin's *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (Grafton, London, 1989), when Brian Nolan was looking for a pseudonym to have his book published under—for the usual reason that Irish writers used pseudonyms, which was that he was an Irish Civil Servant, and disallowed from using his own name to write under—he had toyed with using the name John Hackett, so the proliferation of pilibeens in the above list may have been intended as an oblique reference to that name, even though it was eventually abandoned



in favour of the frankly far better Flann O'Brien.

On the other hand, Cronin was eleven years old when *AS2B* was published, and was a poet to boot, so this may have to be taken with a reasonably decent-sized pinch of salt. None the less, Flann had a character called Hackett in his last novel, *The Dalkey Archive* (MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1964), and according to Cronin, once had an Airedale called Hackett. Maybe he just liked the name...

The other thing about using pilibeen, rather than pilibín, is that it lends a certain legitimisation to the Anglicisation of another of the names, the cruiskeen lawn. Cruiskeen lawn is the anglicisation of cruiscín lán, meaning, more or less, a full little jug—the Irish language suffix *-ín* is a diminutive, denoting either smallness or affection, or indeed both. Cruiskeen Lawn is also the name of a song sung by a minor character in Dion Boucicault's play *The Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen*, called Myles na Coppaleen, who originated in Gerald Griffin's novel *The Collegians*, where he is Myles-na-Coppaleen. Cruiskeen Lawn was also the name of the column that O'Brien wrote for the *Irish Times* from 1940 until his death in 1966, under the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen, which was changed to Myles na Gopaleen in 1952. The inclusion of cruiskeen lawn as a bird's name in this list, in a book that was published in March 1939, a year and a half before its use in the *Irish Times* is, at the very least, interesting.

*See also:* *At Swim-Two-Birds*; Boucicault, Dion; Broc, An; *The Colleen Bawn*; Cronin, Anthony; Cruiskeen Lawn; *The Dalkey Archive*; Fionn mac Cumhaill; Griffin, Gerald; Hackett; Hyde, Douglas; *Irish Times*; Myles na Coppaleen; Myles-na-Coppaleen; Myles na gCopaleen; Myles na Gopaleen; Pseudonyms; Smyllie, RM

**Bisexuality:** Was he or wasn't he? [*More to be written*]

*See also:* Beard

**Blackrock:** Townland in South County Dublin. [*More to be written*]

**Blackrock College:** Alma mater of a young Brian Nolan. [*More to be written*]

**Blake, Sexton:** *see* **Sexton Blake**

**Blakesley, Stephen:** Author of Sexton Blake and other pulp crime fiction books in the 1940s and 1950s. Alleged by some to have been O'Nolan, based on very dubious evidence. Research is ongoing. [*More to be written*]



**Blather:** A short-lived Irish magazine by Flann and friends.

'Blather doesn't care. A sardonic laugh escapes us as we bow, cruel and cynical hounds that we are. It is a terrible laugh, the laugh of lost men. Do you get the smell of porter?' [*More to*

*be written]*

**Bloomsday:** 16 June 1904, the day on which the majority of the action in James Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place. [*More to be written*]

**Bónapart Ó Cúnasa:** Clueless protagonist of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. [*More to be written*]

*See also:* Bootsurl!

**Bones of Contention:** A column for the *Nationalist and Leinster Times* under the pseudonym George Knowall; these were collected in the volume *Myles Away From Dublin*, edited by Martin Green (Granada, London, 1985). [*More to be written*]

**Bookmark:** 'St Augustine Strikes Back: De scribendi periculo,' *Bookmark*, World Book Fair Special (London, 1964) [*More to be written*]

**Books:** *An Béal Bocht*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Dalkey Archive*, *The Hard Life*, *The Third Policeman*, etc., etc. [*More to be written*]

**Bookstand:** see **BBC**

**Bootsurl!**: Amongst the only English language words that Bónapart Ó Cúnasa, clueless protagonist of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, knows. When he attempts to use them to buy boots from a cobbler in a city that might or might not be Galway, he finds himself under arrest.

*See also:* Bónapart Ó Cúnasa

**Borges, Jorge Luis:** Argentinian writer [*To be written*]

**Boston College:** see John J Burns Library, Boston College

**Boucicault, Dion:** Dublin-born writer Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot, more commonly known as Dion Boucicault. Author of *The Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen*, a melodramatic play in the paddywhackery style of its time. First performed at Miss Laura Keane's Theatre, New York, on 27 March 1860, with Boucicault playing the part of Myles na Coppaleen, a poacher and poitín maker. The play was based on Gerald Griffin's 1829 novel, *The Collegians*, which in its turn was based on the story of Ellen Scanlan (née Hanley), a fifteen-year-old Irish girl who was murdered on the River Shannon in 1819. Brian O'Nolan borrowed several names from *The Colleen Bawn*, both for the titles of columns, and for a pseudonym.

*See also:* *Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen*, *The; Collegians*, *The; Column Bawn*, *The; Cruiskeen Bawn*, *The; Griffin, Gerald*; Myles na Coppaleen; Myles-na-Coppaleen; Myles na gCopaleen; Myles na Gopaleen; Pseudonyms



**Bowling Green:** Brian O’Nolan was born at 15 Bowling Green, Strabane, County Tyrone, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 1911. There is a blue plaque commemorating his birth on a house on Bowling Green, but online sources suggest that this is either on No 6, or on No 17. Research is ongoing.

***Boy from Ballytearmin, The*:** TV play (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 1962) [*More to be written*]

**Brein:** On his birth certificate Brian O’Nolan’s first (or Christian) name is mistakenly written as Brein. Or it is in the version of said certificate whose photograph appears in Peter Costello and Peter Van De Kamp’s *Flann O’Brien: An Illustrated Biography* (Bloomsbury, London, 1987), anyway.

**Brian:** The only part of his given name that remained consistent in the various versions of it he used - Brian Nolan, Brian O’Nolan, Brian Ó Nualláin, Brian Ua Nualláin—although it should be noted that the pronunciation of Brian is different in the latter two, being pronounced in the Irish language. BrEan, as opposed to Br/an. Also undoubtedly the source of the surname in his most famous pseudonym, Flann O’Brien.

*See also:* Nolan; Brian, O’Brien, Flann; O’Nolan, Brian; Ó Nualláin, Brian; Ua Nualláin, Brian

**Brian O’Linn:** A poem.

Now Brian O’Linn was a gentleman born  
 He lived in a time when no clothes they were worn  
 When fashion walked out, sure Brian walked in  
 “I’ll give yis fashion,” says Brian O’Linn

Brian O’Linn was hard-up for a coat

So he borrowed the skin of a neighbouring goat  
With the horns stickin' out from his oxters he grinned  
"Sure they'll think that they're pistols," says Brian O'Linn

Now Brian O'Linn had no breeches to wear  
So he got him a sheepskin to make him a pair  
With the fleshy side out and the wooly side in  
"They're pleasant cool," says Brian O'Linn

In *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan* (Ed Timothy O'Keeffe, Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, London, 1973) John Garvin, who had been Nolan's superior in the Irish Civil Service, wrote,

I do not recall having ever discussed with Brian the origin of his pen-name, Flann O'Brien, but I was and am quite certain that he derived it from the hero of an old ballad, Brian O'Linn, in Irish, Brian O Fhloinn, which he turned backways, taking the nominative of O Floinn, Flann, as a personal name, which, indeed, it was—one thousand years previously.

**Brinsley:** Niall Sheridan, a college friend of Brian O'Nolan, appears as the character Brinsley in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. [*More to be written*]

**Broc, An:** The first Cruiskeen Lawn column in the *Irish Times*, on 4 October 1940, was subtitled 'From A Correspondent,' and signed at the bottom with the name An Broc—meaning The Badger—a name supposedly suggested by the paper's editor, RM Smyllie. From the second column, dated 10 October 1940, onward the column was signed off by Myles na gCopaleen, which name it would continue to appear under until 9 December 1952, when it was altered slightly, to Myles na Gopaleen, supposedly because the author hoped it would help make the column more saleable abroad.

**Brother, The:** Who was he? [*More to be written*]

**Brother, The:** Eamon Morrissey's one-man show *The Brother*, based on the works of Flann O'Brien, premiered in Dublin's Peacock Theatre on 18 February 1974, and still occasionally get produced. [*More to be written*]

**Brother, The (Myles):** A biographical reminiscence by Micheál Ó Nualláin about his brother Brian, self-published in Dublin in 2011. [*More to be written*]

**Brother Barnabas:** Brian O'Nolan wrote in University College Dublin's student magazine *Comhthrom Féinne* from 1931 to 1935, under the name of Brother Barnabas, and possibly others. Much of this work is collected in *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, edited by John Wyse Jackson, and published by Grafton of London in 1983. Perhaps the most important work of his to appear in *Comhthrom Féinne* is a story called 'Scenes in a Novel (probably posthumous) by Brother Barnabas,' which appeared in volume 8 number 2, dated May 1934. This story anticipates several of the



ideas and themes that would later appear in his first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Brother Barnabas is the first known pseudonym of O’Nolan’s, although Anthony Cronin, in *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (Grafton, London, 1989), states that O’Nolan, aided by his brother Ciarán and others, sent letters in to an Irish weekly Roman Catholic newspaper called *The Standard* (later *The Catholic Standard*) on the subject of schoolboys’ homework under various *noms de plume*, such as ‘Concerned Parent’ and ‘Father of Four.’ However, despite a certain amount of searching through microfilm in the National Library of Ireland, this current author cannot verify that.

The source for Brother Barnabas is probably George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (A *Metabiological Pentateuch*) a series of five plays he produced in 1921 which are set at various times, from BC 4004 to AD 31,902, and of which the second is called *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas: Present Day*. There are two Brothers Barnabas, Franklyn, a retired cleric, and Conrad, a biologist, of whom Franklyn is presumably the one intended by O’Nolan.

BERNARD SHAW  
—•—  
BACK TO  
METHUSELAH



*See also:* *At Swim-Two-Birds*; *Comhthrom Féinne*; Cronin, Anthony; Jackson, John Wyse; *No Laughing Matter*; Shaw, George Bernard; *Standard, The*; University College Dublin

**Brothers:** Brian O’Nolan was the third of a family of twelve, and the third born of seven boys in that family. Brian’s brothers were, chronologically, Gearóid (1908), Ciarán (1910), Fergus (1915), Kevin (1917), Micheál (1928), and Niall (1931). Of these six brothers, the two most significant are Ciarán and Micheál, although separated by eighteen years from each other. *[More to be written]*

*See also:* Brother, The; O’Nolan, Ciarán; O’Nolan, Fergus; O’Nolan, Gearóid; O’Nolan, Kevin; O’Nolan, Micheál; O’Nolan, Niall

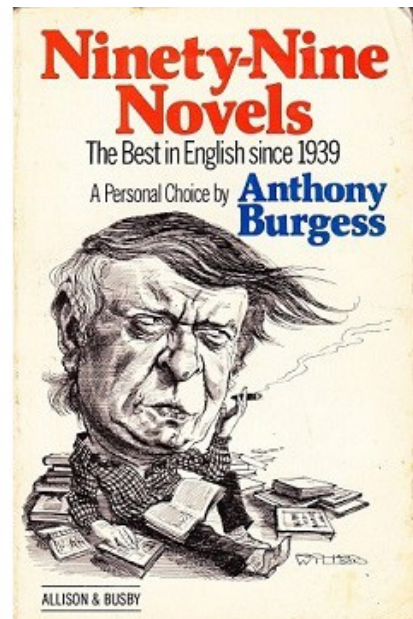
**Buile Shuibhne:** *The Madness of Suibhne* or *Suibhne’s Frenzy*. an old Irish tale about King Suibhne mac Colmain, who was driven mad after being cursed by cleric St Ronan, and spent the rest of his life wandering. Much of *Buile Shuibhne* ends up in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and Sweeney is one of the primary characters in the book. *[More to be written]*

*See also:* *At Swim-Two-Birds*; *Children of Destiny*; Ready-Mades

**Burgess, Anthony:** Burgess included *At Swim-Two-Birds* on his list of *Ninety-Nine Novels: The Best in English since 1939* —A Personal Choice.

‘If we don’t cherish the work of Flann O’Brien we are stupid fools who don’t deserve to have great men. Flann O’Brien is a very great man.’ [More to be written]

**Burns, John J:** see John J Burns Library, Boston College



*Writer Pádraig Ó Méalóid contemplates the mysteries of the universe.*



# Object Found in a Book I: An Béal Bocht Publisher's Note

Pádraig Ó Méalóid

This printed Publisher's Note was found in a copy of *An Béal Bocht*.

This book is indicated as being *An treas eagar* / The third edition, and is a hardcover book in red cloth binding with gold stamped lettering to spine and front cover, in an intact dustjacket, priced at fifteen shillings, and published by Cló Dolmen, Áth Cliath in 1964.

This edition of *An Béal Bocht* is the first to be published in a typeface other than the traditional Irish *Cló Gaelach*, or *Seanchló*, although it still retains the Punctum Delens, or *buailte*, as it is called in Irish, to indicate the modification of pronunciation called *séimhiú* or lenition, which was later replaced by a h after the lenited consonant, as for instance the word *Bocht* on the cover of the book, as you can see.

There is a note on the indicia page which says 'arna gcur i gcló ag an Leinster Leader Ltd., Nás na Ríog do Phreas Dolmen, Tta., 23 Sráid Mhóta Uacht, Ath Cliath, bPoblacht na hEireann,' which translated as 'printed by the Leinster Leader Ltd, Naas, for Dolmen Press, Upper Mount Street, Dublin, Republic of Ireland.' This would in part explain the noting of Mr W Britton of the Leinster Leader Limited as being involved in the production on the *Cló nua-Rómhánach*, or new Roman typeface.

The rest is, I hope, self-explanatory.





# an Béal Boct

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Since 1571, when Queen Elizabeth's printer first attempted to give a typographical expression to the Irish language, over twenty Gaelic typefaces have been made. In attempting to be 'different' and in drawing inspiration from bastard sources, most of these have failed in their essential purpose. Political and religious differences have also been major influences and, in this century, within the language movement itself, there are two major schools of thought about the printing of the language, one adhering to the so-called tradition of *Cló Gaelaí* and the other to *Cló Rómánaí*, or the use of the ordinary printer's repertoire of so-called 'Roman' typefaces with the addition of vowel accents and the use of the lowercase 'h' to indicate aspirated consonants.

There is right on both sides, for the lowercase 'Roman' alphabet of everyday print derives directly from the Irish half uncial of our historic manuscripts and is, in typographical terms, a practical expression of that alphabet. Queen Elizabeth's printer, in adapting a standard fount of his day by the addition of the necessary extra characters was thinking in more truly typographical terms than the good friars at Louvain who, in 1608, engaged a local punch cutter to make, for their books in Irish, what must have been to him an 'exotic' face based on the semi-formal hand of one of the monks. Attempts to cut further Gaelic in London, Paris and Rome during the next two centuries were similarly misguided. Two faces cut in Dublin, one in the 1830s from George Petrie's designs and Colm O'Lochlainn's Monotype Colmille a century later, did derive from the earlier manuscript sources and were much more satisfying, but both are rather specialised and too decorative for general use.

The typeface used in this book is Times New Roman, a twentieth-century design by Stanley Morison, cast from Monotype matrices. Two new characters,  $\tau$  and  $\rho$ , have been specially cut in Gaelic style, and the necessary accents have been added to the fount. Clarity and economy are aimed at in this purely typographical approach to the 'Irish' problem.

Mr. W. Britton, Leinster Leader Limited, Naas and the Monotype Corporation have co-operated in the production of 'Cló nua-Rómánaí'.



# Flannland

Val Nolan

Imagine what Ireland would have been like if Flann O'Brien had become Taoiseach! I once did. In fact I wrote a whole novel about it, a novice effort if I'm to be honest (and one which will never see the light of day!), but I still sometimes think about how much fun it was to spend time in that other Ireland. It was a world in which Brian O'Nolan—the real Flann O'Brien, insofar as that means anything—resigned his Civil Service post to run against Éamon de Valera's incumbent Fianna Fáil administration in the late 1940s. To everyone's great surprise he won, and in between considerable effort spent trying to have his own books banned, the fictional Flann instigated a series of unlikely social and technological revolutions.

Sixty years later (the novel was set in the then present of 2011), Flann's Ireland boasts coffee grown in tented valleys in the MacGillycuddy Reeks, has a tunnel to Tyrone (from where is never specified), is three decades into a space programme which sent an Irish astronaut into orbit in the 1980s, and is a country where science fiction rather than literary fiction is the national house style (for instance, crime novelist Benjamin Black has a side-line writing literary fiction under a pseudonym, while 'John McGahern had produced some of the finest novels about robots ever to come out of Ireland, uncompromising accounts of the social and economic realities of performing repetitive tasks over and over again').

One thread of this novel followed historian Anna Barry in her quest to unravel the history of an Ireland which regards the long dead Flann as its near-mythical Great Leader (one part Michael Collins, one part Mao Zedong, one part... well, Flann O'Brien):

As a child, Flann had been Anna's inspiration. Over and over she had read the pop-up autobiography he had written for those he liked to call his younger voters. Naturally, much of what he claimed to be his life was subsequently contradicted by her education, those years she spent in heavy green wool beneath the Sisters' gaze. Her school was rare in that it still had a Catholic ethos, Flann having almost done away with the Church by hounding it with its own implausibility and lies. Its last hurrah had come after a 1916 Rising commemoration in Ballinasloe where Flann, all too merry on misappropriated tabernacle wine, had crawled into a hole in the ground to sleep it off. With his friends too hungover to go and find him, Flann did not rise for three whole days, at which point the parish priest removed his collar and wept, declaring 'I have been worshipping a false prophet.' Commentators have pointed out that the priest never clarified whether he was referring to Christ or Flann himself, but nonetheless the die was cast. When Flann next returned to Ballinasloe, the church had been converted into stables serving the town's famous horse fair, and it was here that Flann delivered one of his best-known speeches, the so-called Sermon on the Dismount.

As part of her research, Anna discovers a trove of Flann's 'yellowed, harp-stamped memoranda.' Among his unlikely policy documents (a separate currency for Clondalkin, a proposal to tow Rockall into Clew Bay, and so on) is a smattering of cheeky international correspondence:

TO: HM Queen Elizabeth II  
FROM: B. O’Nolan, TD.  
DATE: 3 June 1951  
RE: Diplomatic Relations

Dear Ms. Windsor,

On behalf of the Irish people, please accept my invitation for England to become part of the Irish Republic. It is my firm belief that such a binding, constitutional union will contribute markedly to the future of these islands, hereafter to be known as The Irish Archipelago.

I suggest, and no doubt you agree, that Dublin ought to command external affairs, taxation, and the like, while England’s domestic policies will be governed by its own parliament. My administration has already set aside suitable accommodation for English deputies, henceforth ‘Teachtaí Dála (Sasanacha)’, in a lovely parish hall in County Waterford. I believe they will be very happy there.

Is Mise,

Brian O’Nolan,  
Taoiseach.

Anna’s storyline eventually intersects with one dominated by a very different kind of missive. This second plot is set among researchers at the ‘Ear the size of Ireland’, a ‘chain of radio telescopes in the Dublin Mountains linked in real-time to another string of dishes far away in Connemara’. Here, functional drug addict Charlotte ‘Charlie’ Kilroy records ‘a strong, narrowband emission from an undetermined location’:

‘You want me to believe that this is a message from *outer space*?’

‘That’s not the point,’ Charlie said.

Walsh only laughed. ‘You tell me that you’ve received a signal from another world,’ he said, ‘but that’s not the point?’

‘Here,’ she handed him her headphones and shook the recorder in his face.

‘Now I have to listen to it too?’

‘Yeah you do,’ Charlie said, ‘because it’s in *Irish*.’

It soon transpires that this message originated in our Ireland, meaning in the reader’s reality, ‘an event well beyond probability but not beyond The Pale’. The newspapers christen this the ‘*Bhaw!* Signal’ in honour of ‘some gaeilgeoir astronomer’s exclamatory scribble on the print-out’, and the real world soon becomes an object of endless fascination for the fictional one:

This other Ireland styled itself a knowledge economy though apparently no one there knew anything about that. Their economic and social growth was haphazard at best, lurching and stalling with an arbitrary nature which had made fools of the experts and experts of the

fools. Their country was festooned with plaques to the past but it seemed they had little grasp on the concept of the future. It was a nineteenth-century society in a twenty-first century suit, a place where greed ran rampant and clerics buggered children with aplomb. It was an Ireland without Flann, Charlie thought, or without the real Flann anyway...

These storylines (along with those of a maladjusted minister's son and a paraplegic with an imaginary friend who might just be a creation of Flann himself) culminate in a mission to cross over into the real world. As part of the preparation for this, Anna has the opportunity to review Flann's personal copy of Albert Einstein's *Essays on Science*:

The dead leader's multicoloured marginalia spiralled like galaxies across every white space. Those scribbles prefigured the thought experiments that eventually bore fruit in Sergeant Pluck's unnatural philosophising, everyone knew that, but they also inspired O'Nolan's political career. Cause and effect were ever only notional in Ireland anyway, but, in the Flannian universe, running interference became not just a bureaucratic occupation but an electromagnetic certainty. In the same vein, Flann himself became atomic, the whole nation thundering around him the way electrons whirl around a nucleus and, in the airy depths between their orbits, the nation's creaking superstitions were superseded by more universal constants. As leader, Anna had once joked, the novelist had become a national O'Nucleus. She had said that at a conference and someone had written it down. To this day it remained her best-known observation. Flann loved a trier, she thought, and people always love a sound bite.

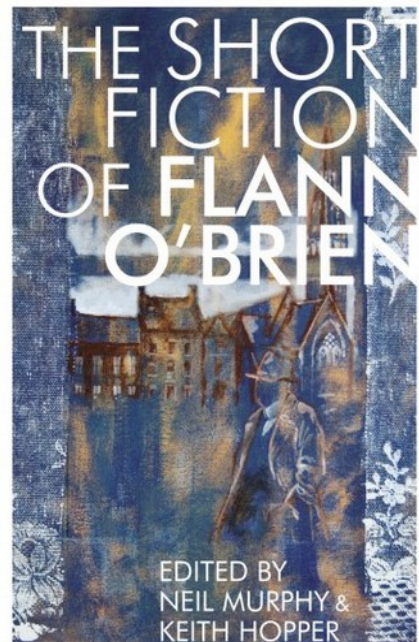
Someday I might return to my Flann novel. Or it may return to me (a multi-universal gateway opens both ways, after all!). I imagine it would have to be rewritten from scratch—or, for that matter, rewritten as something other than a novel, who knows?—but that's okay. For now it remains a very enjoyable twelve months I once spent scribbling in the shadow of a mad genius, a year's sabbatical in an Ireland different enough from reality to be, out of the corner of my eye anyway, implausible but never *entirely* impossible...

*Val Nolan lectures on creative writing and literature at Aberystwyth University in Wales. His academic work has appeared in Journal of Comic Books and Graphic Novels, Irish Studies Review, and his article 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science Fiction: O'Brien's Surprising Synthesis' appeared in Review of Contemporary Fiction (2012). His own fiction has appeared in Interzone, Unidentified Funny Objects, Nature's Futures, and The Year's Best Science Fiction. His Brexit satire 'Corkxit' recently appeared in The Incubator while his story 'The Irish Astronaut' was shortlisted for the Theodore Sturgeon Award.*

# The Case for John Shamus O'Donnell

Jack Fennell

This essay is an intervention into a disagreement ('debate' is probably too strong a word) that arose following the publication of *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* (Dalkey Archive Press, Dublin, 2013). The disagreement centred on the inclusion of a short science fiction story which may or may not be the work of Brian/Myles/Flann under a previously unknown pseudonym. Reactions to the inclusion of this piece have ranged from the generally positive to the somewhat reproachful. To date, editors Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper have responded to the reproachful criticisms by pointing out that 'Naval Control,' by the mysterious 'John Shamus O'Donnell,' was included in order to find out who this author actually was: there is a good chance it may be Flann, but there is no way to conclusively prove it, and perhaps the best way to find out for sure is to throw the question open to anyone out there who may know the truth of the matter.



Until such time as someone comes forward with incontrovertible evidence one way or the other, though, I do have to offer some justification—because to a certain extent, the inclusion of this story in the collection was my fault. Here, I would like to take the opportunity to explain the reasons why I think John Shamus O'Donnell may be another Brian O'Nolan pseudonym. I believe there is sufficient evidence in O'Nolan's work to suggest that he read enough science fiction to be able to parody it, and the short story itself is almost certainly the work of an Irish author. Thanks to the contents of the O'Nolan library in Boston, we now have a more complete picture of the man's interests and reading habits (see Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley's 'An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College,' *The Parish Review* 2:1, International Flann O'Brien Society, 2013).

## Guess Who

'Naval Control' is narrated by a widower mourning the death of his beloved wife, Florence Minerva, his 'spiritual six-foot Jeanne d'Arc,' who died four months ago from an illness contracted while doing missionary work in Peru. The narrator's friend, the eccentric Irish scientist Professor Egan, decides to help him out by constructing a robot replica of Florence Minerva in his New York laboratory, thereafter transporting her by train across America to the narrator's home in Oakland, California. Unfortunately, owing to electromagnetic resonance, Florence Minerva II starts to mimic the thought-patterns of a sailor with a metal plate in his head, and falls in love with him. It all ends in tears as the robot wades out into San Francisco bay in pursuit of this sailor and vanishes beneath the waves, while the



narrator and Professor look on, powerless to stop her.

The story was published in the winter 1932 issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, arguably the best-known science fiction magazine of the twentieth century. This in itself presents a problem when trying to figure out who John Shamus O'Donnell actually was. The renowned (and often reviled) science fiction publisher Hugo Gernsback lost control of *Amazing Stories* magazine in 1929, which means that O'Donnell would have dealt with T O'Connor Sloane (editor from 1929 to 1938). The change in editorship had a number of effects on the magazine, as highlighted by the science fiction critic and historian Gary Westfahl (in *The Mechanics of Wonder: The Creation of the Idea of Science Fiction*, Gary Westfahl, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998).

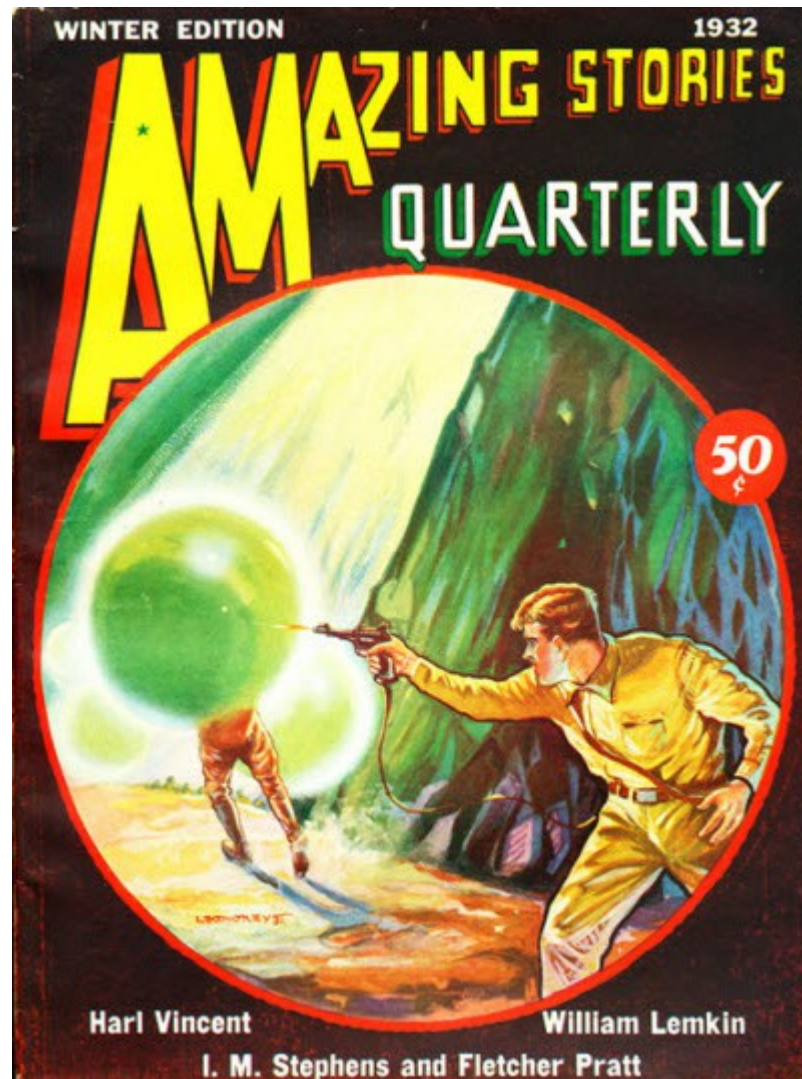
Soon after Sloane took over, Westfahl tells us, a number of major writers stopped contributing to *Amazing Stories*, a fact which Sloane put down to writers being 'a very sensitive class of people'; in the same editorial, he tried to put a positive spin on this situation by stating that the desertion left room for the discovery of new talent. It is more likely, however, that the authors in question left out of sheer frustration, for among other things, Sloane was inclined 'to tinker with and revise' stories without consulting them. As well as this, he was infamous for his lax attitude to correspondence with authors, sometimes going for years without giving any response.

Taking these factors into account, it is possible that John Shamus O'Donnell might not have known that 'Naval Control' was published at all, and the version that appeared in *Amazing Stories* may have been subtly different to the draft he submitted for publication. Taken in conjunction with the likelihood that 'John Shamus O'Donnell' was a pseudonym (indicated by an absence of verifiable biographical data), these factors make the task of identifying him quite difficult.

To begin with, I have no concrete reason for believing that John Shamus O'Donnell was a 'he' at all—the pulp fiction sci-fi game was infamously hostile to female authors, many of whom were obliged to use male pseudonyms. (To take just one example, one can look to the career of Alice Sheldon, one of the most revered science fiction authors of the twentieth century and the genre's first gender theorist, who published all her works under the pen-name 'James Tiptree, Jr' until inquisitive fans uncovered her true identity in 1976.) The basic plot of the story, however, is one that immediately suggests a male author, the story of Pygmalion and Galatea given a technological makeover; the plot is so well-worn that it has been summarised in the anonymous 'Shortest Science Fiction Story Ever Written': 'Boy meets Girl. Boy loses Girl. Boy builds Girl.'

Everett Bleiler's index (*Science-Fiction—The Gernsback Years: A complete coverage of the genre magazines Amazing, Astounding, Wonder and others from 1926 through 1936*, Everett F Bleiler, Kent State University Press, Kent, Ohio, 1998) includes categories for artificial women and mechanical substitutes for women, as well as an entry under the category 'Women, exploited, abused' referring to women being 'genetically specialized as secretaries.' Perhaps the best-known example of these kinds of stories is Lester Del Rey's 'Helen O'Loy' (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1938), in which two men, a medic and a mechanic, collaborate on the creation of the titular artificial woman. As Veronica Hollinger notes, 'As in many stories of this kind, the result is a 'woman' built to the specifications of men, a 'woman' with virtually no individuality or agency, a technological triumph that

displaces women.’ Female authors, for the most part, have only reprised this plot with a heavy dollop of irony; ‘Naval Control,’ light-hearted though it may be, is not very ironic or nuanced when it comes to gender politics. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that the pseudonymous author was a man.



*Amazing Stories Quarterly, Winter 1932. Cover by Leo Morey*

In the course of trying to figure out who O'Donnell was, I've highlighted a few oddities which lead me to believe that the author, in addition to being a man, was an Irishman. Furthermore, he seems to have been an Irishman with little or no first-hand experience of America or its culture.

For one thing, the narrator states that he lives outside the city of Oakland, California, 'on the Golden Gate.' At the time the story was published (and there is no evidence in the text to suggest it is set in the future), the narrator could only be referring to the body of water called the Golden Gate strait, as construction did not begin on the Golden Gate Bridge until 1933. The Golden Gate, however, is a good distance away from the city of Oakland; the Oakland Bay Bridge (which allows easy travel between the two places) did not exist at the time of the story's publication either—construction on this bridge started in 1933, and it was not open for traffic until 1936. Thus, the narrator might be able to see the

Bay from his house, but it doubtful that ‘the Golden Gate’ itself is anywhere near his actual address.

Hopper and Murphy suggest that the narrator’s given address, ‘Beal Gulch,’ may be derived from ‘Bear Gulch Road’ (which is a real area in the vicinity of Redwood City, across the San Francisco Bay from Oakland), or possibly from ‘Béal Gulch.’ ‘Béal’ is a common enough component of Irish place-names: while it literally means ‘mouth,’ in geographical terms it also denotes an approach or an entrance – for example, Belfast’s name comes from *Béal Feirste* (‘Entrance/Approach to the Sand-banks’).

Another oddity is the mad scientist Egan’s journey from New York to San Francisco on board a service called the ‘Mohawk Limited,’ which starts at Grand Central Station in New York City, moves to Garrison, New York, and arrives at Oakland Mole. To check this route out, I contacted rail historian Adam Burns at American-Rails.com. Mr. Burns very generously took the time to look into my queries and responded:

I know of no train ever called the ‘Mohawk Limited’, although that is not to say there was never one by that name. Additionally, its routing is very odd and because of this I am almost sure, at the very least, that it never connected the cities mentioned: first and foremost, there is no city by the name of Oakland Mole, California (although there is an Oakland); secondly, Garrison, New York would be a strange city for a transcontinental train to connect considering its very small size (less than 5,000 people); and thirdly, there were no transcontinental passenger trains back in those days (and there still aren’t today), although passengers did have the opportunity to purchase through service or transfer trains along the way (for instance, catching a train in New York, transferring at Chicago, and continuing on to California or another western point). – (Adam Burns, ‘The Mohawk Limited.’ Message to the author. October 6<sup>th</sup> 2011. E-mail.)


The ‘Oakland Mole’ (‘mole’ meaning a man-made causeway or breakwater) referred to in the story is probably the Oakland Long Wharf, also known as the SP Mole, which was the western terminus of the Central Pacific Railroad. Transport aside, another minor (though significant) error has to do with American popular culture: at one point, the narrator describes hearing a church choir singing ‘Over the River,’ a secular Thanksgiving song sometimes used as a Christmas carol—a bizarre song to be sung as a hymn in a church in the middle of March or April, backed by organ music.

Admittedly, this seems like pointless nit-picking. However, the job of the sf author is to convince the reader that the events described, however bizarre they may be, are taking place in a world consistent with the rules of the one we know. Tales set a thousand years hence have more leeway when it comes to this, so long as they observe known laws of physics (or provide a justifying explanation if those rules are broken); stories set in the present day, however, have to also preserve the state of the world (unless an ‘alternate history’ is posited).

With this in mind, the geographical and cultural oddities listed above don’t seem like deliberate whimsy—if anything, they would be more pronounced if this was the author’s intention. Rather, they appear to be mistakes, and as such indicate that the author was not American, but rather filled his short story with details taken from history books and travel

guides, conjecture based on maps and atlases, and American popular culture—thus accounting for the missteps in background detail and the awkward attempt at American slang when Florence Minerva II refers to herself as ‘a hot shot three o’clock blonde.’ The possibility that the author was Irish also explains a number of other things, from certain turns of phrase to apparent Irish in-jokes, such as the telegram sent from Egan to the narrator at the beginning of the story from Garrison, which is dated March 17<sup>th</sup>.

So, John Shamus O’Donnell was probably Irish. That still does not prove that O’Donnell was O’Nolan. At this point, it may be useful to look at O’Nolan’s known engagements with sf, to provide a context for this whole inquiry.



VOL. 5—NO. 1  
WINTER, 1932

# AMAZING STORIES

Quarterly

## CONTENTS

A Voice Across the Years	2
<i>By I. M. Stephens and Fletcher Pratt</i>	
The Difference (A poem)	73
<i>By E. A. Everett</i>	
Once in a Blue Moon	74
<i>By Harl Vincent</i>	
Insects Extraordinary	84
<i>By Walter Kateley</i>	
Blue Waters	96
<i>By William Lemkin, Ph.D.</i>	
Starvation in Space	122
<i>By Earle H. Morris</i>	
Moss Island	136
<i>By Carl Jacobi</i>	
Naval Control	141
<i>By John Shamus O'Donnell</i>	
Your Viewpoint	144
<i>Illustration by MOREY</i>	
<p><b>Our Cover</b></p> <p>this issue depicts a scene from the story entitled, "Once in a Blue Moon," by Harl Vincent, in which Mort Saunders is being absorbed by the globular "Higher Ones" of the Moon, while the younger man continues in a hopeless attempt to "down" these "spheres."</p>	
<i>Cover Illustration by MOREY</i>	
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Contents page of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, Winter 1932 edition



## Myles in Space

Among his earliest works is a short story in Irish (written as Brian Ó Nualláin), ‘Díoghaltas ar Ghallaibh ‘sa Bhliadhain 2032’ which I translated as ‘Revenge on the English in the Year 2032’ for the *Short Fiction* collection. Originally published in *The Irish Press* in 1932, the story sends the narrator forward in time to an Ireland where English is no longer spoken; at one point, he gazes in astonishment at the date on a receipt—12/02/2032—only to finally remark that he thought it was only the eleventh. This demonstrates that, at the age of twenty-one, Ó Nualláin/O’Nolan was familiar enough with the clichés of time-travel stories to be able to make fun of them (and he was obviously counting on his readers to get the joke too).

O’Nolan’s later interest in sf can be seen in the Cruiskeen Lawn columns (Cruiskeen Lawn, *Irish Times*, 4 October 1940—1 April 1966, as Myles na gCopaleen, and as Myles na Gopaleen from 1952), where Jules Verne is an occasional guest star in the ‘Keats and Chapman’ stories and Myles regularly claims to live on the moon. O’Nolan’s well-documented interest in quantum theory informs Myles’s vernacular, such as his mention of having read something by Patrick Kavanagh ‘a quaternion of moons ago’ (CL, 7 May 1945), while the Brother, among many other things, is also something of a mad scientist, combining astronomy with research into ‘quateernyuns’ (CL, 18 June 1943).

Neither deliberate malapropisms nor a cavalier attitude to the sciences necessarily disqualify a work from being termed ‘science fiction,’ especially when it’s supposed to be funny; to take one example, we might look at Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series, which is indisputably science fiction and yet has practically no grounding in any kind of real-world science. (Interestingly, it seems that Myles anticipated the central premise of Adams’ series in 1954, with his reaction to a book entitled *A Guide to the Moon*: ‘I hope it contains, as the title suggests, the names of the best hotels, 4-star restaurants, address of the US Embassy, the pubs to avoid, and other elementary statistics’ (CL, 13 January 1954)). Despite the name, ‘science fiction’ has more to do with pseudoscience than with actual science (as demonstrated by the trope of faster-than-light travel, for example), and the Myles persona in particular was ideally suited to writing it:

I do not disguise that I find it more pleasant and easy to write on quasi-fictional and hypothetical themes rather than about ‘facts’; thus I am attracted to projects for visiting the moon, the search for the Philosopher’s Stone, democracy, vegetarianism, cures for baldness, horse racing, ‘additives’ which make petrol of supernatural propulsolosity, and various other situations wherein is to be detected the hand of the fairies. (CL, 28 April 1955)

One interesting application of this pseudoscientific imagination is an apparent ‘dry run’ of *The Dalkey Archive*, featuring Myles Na Gopaleen as an insane scientist who has invented a substance called ‘Cruscalon’ in his home laboratory in Santry, necessitating that the surrounding area be cordoned off and evacuated; Cruscalon is intended to help mankind by ‘throwing the earth into neutral,’ thus allowing the planet to orbit the sun without using as much fuel or incurring much wear and tear. Cruscalon also gives the user control over the planet’s revolution. Among Dr Na Gopaleen’s other schemes is a plan to turn Earth into a bomb, to repel ‘attacks’ from the sun and the moon, the latter of which Myles regards as

an 'obsequious nocturnal spy.' At the story's close, we are told that Dr Na Gopaleen has been 'taken away by four keepers and will be out of town for forty years' (CL, 25 January 1956).

O'Nolan was keenly interested in science and politics, but at the same time he had an obvious instinctive distrust of the professionals associated with those fields. The intersection between them was therefore a cause for special concern, and as the 'space race' intensified in the decades following World War II, O'Nolan expressed this concern through Myles na Gopaleen, an alter-ego who could respond publicly to astro-political developments as they arose.

In a column entitled 'Dream No More,' Myles voices his trepidation at the speed with which science fiction seemed to be changing into science fact, and warns that 'If it is permitted to go on, there will be nothing left to dream about.' His anxiety seems to have been triggered in this instance by the launch of an American nuclear submarine called the Nautilus, after Captain Nemo's war machine from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Myles did not see this as a coincidence or homage:

There is no avoiding the conclusion that these 'scientists' read the most fanciful penny-dreadful stuff they can lay their hands on, including the comic-strips intended for juveniles interested in death-rays, space ships and sweethearts from Mars, and then quietly make all that come true. The more impossible the project, the more certain they will succeed. (CL, 13 January 1954)

This is a little disingenuous of Myles, given that he himself was an admitted fan of the 'penny-dreadful stuff.' In 'A Word on Spookery,' Myles professes to believe in such phenomena as ghosts, telepathy, telekinesis, poltergeists and levitation, stating that these subjects have been investigated by 'sane and responsible men' and asserting that the existence of supernatural phenomena is confirmed by the Catholic Church. Myles then undermines the earnestness of these arguments, however, by admitting that the subject was put into his head by a comic book—specifically, by an issue of Archie Comics' *The Fly*, wherein the titular hero has to do battle with the leprechaun Tim O'Casey and his army of belligerent robots. (CL, 31 August 1959)

Even as he disparaged the genre as juvenile, Myles frequently employed science fiction tropes to illustrate his point: the solar system of the Cruiskeen Lawn was, in the tradition of the old pulp-fiction 'space operas,' fully inhabited and disconcertingly fragile.

In a column entitled 'Lunacy' (CL, 11 August 1955), Myles looks on aghast at Russian and American plans to engage in a 'celestial football match' and expresses some fear as to the outcome. As well as the USA annexing Pluto and 'conferring upon its inhabitants the right to pursue happiness,' Myles hypothesises that manned space-flight may upset the natural order of things so much that the laws of physics themselves will be thrown into disarray, with the tides ceasing and Earth leaving its normal orbital path to circle around Mars instead—thus exposing humanity to the risk of invasion from hypothetical metallic-skinned Martian slave-drivers. It falls to Ireland, being devoid of any 'lunatic or interplanetary imperialisms,' to talk the superpowers down from their expansionist euphoria. To that end, Myles sends a telegram to Eisenhower reading: 'Very glad you have

*graciously decided not to interfere with the sun—Myles.*’ (CL, 11 August 1955)

In ‘The Moon and I,’ Myles’s alarmist warnings become even more extreme. Beginning with a criticism of the space race between the USA and USSR as a race to see who ‘owns’ the moon, he hypothesises about what might happen if atomic bombs were detonated up there; perhaps the moon would fragment and turn into a comet, flying off into outer space. The consequences, Myles tells us, would be catastrophic: marine life would die, Earth’s orbit would alter to bring us closer to the sun (thus shortening terrestrial years and throwing human timekeeping out of order) and the polar ice caps would melt. Alongside all of this, he argues, human science would have to start again from scratch, since all human systems of knowledge are founded on natural constants—one of which is the presence of a moon in our sky. This is all due to ‘the demonic ingenuity of those scientists’ and is the logical fate of a world wherein Eisenhower and Khrushchev are worshipped ‘as new gods, to be known perhaps as Holy Electron and Blessed Proton.’ (CL, 23 August 1958)

Two days later, in a column entitled ‘Martial Aid,’ Myles na Gopaleen again considers the US-Soviet rivalry with regards to space exploration. The fact that the ‘atom-clad spatial imperialists’ are already racing to conquer the moon, he argues, behoves us to consider how the colonisation of Mars might proceed. ‘I see no objection to the maniac militarists staging massive invasions of Mars,’ he says, because the journey to Mars will logically be a one-way trip. Reflecting the common knowledge of the day, Myles remarks that Mars is supposed to have an atmosphere, a sunny, temperate climate and ‘a profusion of lakes and canals’ (though he dismisses the latter as nonsense). This leads him to surmise that Mars is quite like Ireland, and he asks, ‘If we don’t much like being here, do we really want to go there?’ This reservation notwithstanding, he insists that any future mission to the red planet include an Irish ambassador, whose first task would be to take over the canals on behalf of CIE, because ‘In recent years there has been a regrettable shortage of oul yap out of that crowd’ (CL, 25 August 1958).

On other occasions, however, Myles often considered space exploration in a more positive (or at least less fearful) light. In the midst of an economic rant in one column, he obliquely laments that the Irish are discouraged from joining in with the project of lunar colonisation by a too-generous social welfare system: ‘What (on earth) do people want to go to the moon for? What’s wrong with Ireland? Short of everywhere but heaven, where else can we get everything for nearly nothing, where else can we batten on a small iron core of excruciated tax-payers?’ (CL, 20 August 1955). Elsewhere, he denounces astronomers as ‘assemblers of useless data,’ and chastises them for dismissing accounts of ‘flying saucers’ (CL, 5 September 1955).

There were also practical things to consider. In ‘White House Party,’ Myles frets about the possibility of a third World War, and wonders if some of the space rockets being developed could be used to evacuate ‘invaluable philosophers like myself’ to the moon or Venus, though he admits that ‘We have, of course, no assurance that awful wars are not in progress also in those places’ (CL, 29 August 1959). Two years later, in ‘Space, Drink, Covetousness,’ Myles considers the effects that easily-affordable space travel may have on Irish society: in one scenario, the author arrives home to find the house empty and a note from ‘my treasured benatee or shanvan’ to tell him that she’s gone to the moon, and she’s

left his dinner in the oven for him; in the second one, a gang of drunks are 'bet out of a pub in Donnybrook' and decide to fly off into outer space in search of another bar. This glimpse of a future Dublin, where a space-ship can be 'parked' around the back of Herbert Park, indicates that Myles was, in his own way, warming to the idea of a science-fictional future (CL, 19 April 1961).

Another column takes aim at ZETA, the British experimental fusion reactor that was promised to deliver limitless energy from seawater. Again, Myles wonders what effect this innovation will have on the average household: 'It will be changed times for us all. 'Why not have your own sun at home?' will be the advertisement of the future.' The seas will eventually dry up as the seawater is exhausted by nuclear fusion, leading to humanity's inevitable doom. Myles concludes that only one thing is certain—'Those scientists are going to make a *bagz* of us!' (CL, 4 February 1958).

These columns show him flip-flopping on the precise nature of his problem with scientists: on the one hand, they are doing too much and endangering the whole world, while on the other, they are not doing enough to bring the glorious future into being. It was probably inevitable that Myles would eventually throw his hat in the ring as an interplanetary explorer. In an article entitled 'Going Upstars,' Myles excuses his recent absence from the paper by explaining that he was actually on the Moon, an expedition made off his own bat, without the support of the government or private enterprise: the only help he received was a pair of pills from a kindly doctor, the purpose of which is not explained. Wearing a space-suit of his own design, with one tank of liquid oxygen and another of malt (combining to make a powerful propellant), upon completing his journey the author finds himself in an environment much like a hiring fair in Tipperary, full of youths smoking Pasha cigarettes (CL, 5 March 1962).

In Myles's second instalment of his lunar journey, he refrains from describing the moon in any great detail, save to note that it has neither water nor atmosphere, but instead is abundant in very thin lava, which he supposes could be brewed into a kind of *poitín*. As an Irishman, he found the journey to the moon more arduous than American astronauts do: being of a 'saintly disposition,' he tells us he was subjected to attacks from the astral plane, 'evil banshees, demoniac vampires and goodness knows what fearsome scruff from the netherest pit of hell'; despite this, he plans on going back there (in a sort of 'planetary van') to plant the Irish flag and live on a semi-permanent basis. Among his plans are to set up lunar branches of the Gaelic League (to be named *An Cumann Gealach*) and the 'Feeny Fayl' party, as well as a department of finance (The Irish pun is a play on *Gaelach*, meaning 'Gaelic': *gealach* is the Irish word for moon (among many other things, as Myles points out in his regular attacks on Father Dinneen's Irish dictionary)). He anticipates that by the time the Americans finally reach the moon, he will have been in residence there for a while, along with a 'small, subject community of Russian flyboys' (7 March 1962).

Descriptions of the moon are scanty again in the next instalment, most of which is concerned with advice on how Ireland should enter the space race: Myles advises against going to the moon, which he says is full of nothing but fishermen and craters, and while Mars supposedly has an atmosphere, 'so has the inside of a Dublin gasometer.' Instead, Myles urges the Irish government to launch a mission to Saturn; after settling at least one



Gael on each ring, the Irish would be able to re-establish the ancient festival of Saturnalia (10 March 1962). Perhaps realising that the joke was not working out as well as he'd hoped, Myles abandoned it after this episode. Among the other books in O'Nolan's library is Rev William Lucas Collins's *Lucian* (1873), a biography of the classical satirist whose works include *True History*, one of the earliest known texts to describe a trip to the moon and give an account of its bizarre inhabitants; perhaps Myles intended to pastiche Lucian with this series, but knowing that the moon had neither water nor an atmosphere, could not bring himself to follow through with it.

The underlying point to all of this is that O'Nolan/Myles clearly had an interest in sf, and returned to it again and again as a means of expressing his anxiety, bemusement or disgust. The tropes he invokes—time-travel, alien life within our solar system, mad scientists and weird inventions—are all staples of the kind of action-adventure tales published in *Amazing Stories*, though he tempers these with spiritual conundrums or Irish clichés. Bearing all of this in mind, I argue that it would be quite odd if he never once tried to get something published in a specialist sf magazine.

## Conclusion

Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper list a number of reasons why O'Donnell might be an O'Nolan persona: a 'thematic fascination with trains, doubles and strange names,' the use of scientific principles for comic effect, the epistolary structure of the middle of the story (i.e. a series of telegrams), and the similarity between the author's name and 'Jams O'Donnell' from *An Béal Bocht*; there is also the unfortunate element of misogyny to take into account. There is also the closing reference to Cabell's *Jurgen*, one of Flann's favourite novels, as the robotic Florence Minerva wades into the sea in pursuit of the ship carrying the sailor she has just fallen in love with. The fact that the story closes with an intertextual reference is another potential piece of evidence, as O'Nolan concludes the short story 'John Duffy's Brother' with a reference to Keats' poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.'

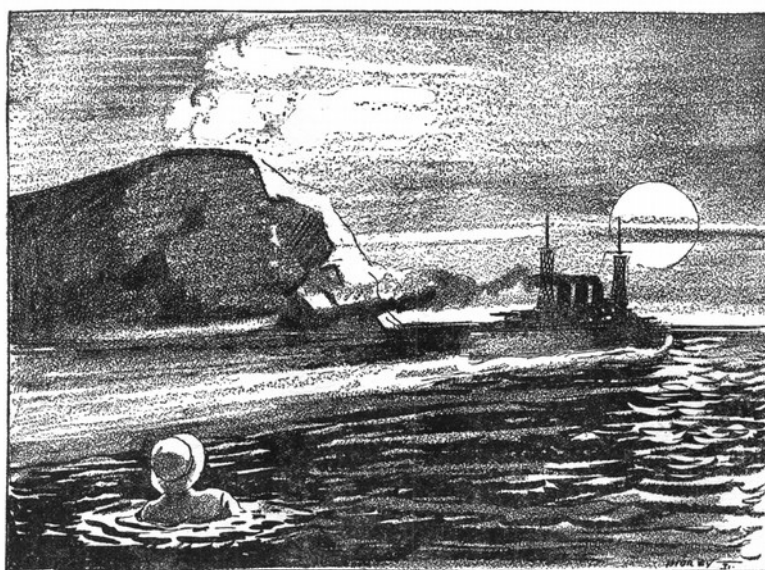
Stylistically, there are other things to go on. This being a pulp sf story, the narrative contains plenty of technobabble—for example 'cerebral cortex,' 'ABCD wiring,' and 'the mechanical organic system'—which O'Nolan would have enjoyed playing around with. Alongside these tips of the hat to science, though, we find a number of religious or spiritual sayings, such as 'Life is but a bridge: pass over but build not a house thereon' (an aphorism attributed to Jesus in Muslim tradition), and 'I have been sacrificed on the altar of Love.' (Aside from the image of the altar, one might guess that the last quote is an oblique reference to 'Abdu'l-Báha, the eldest son of Baha'u'llah—the founder of the Baha'i religion—who describes how those who beheld God 'ran with utmost joy and ecstasy to the city of Martyrdom, sacrificing their minds and lives upon the altar of Love.')

This resonates with the mixture of pseudoscience and spirituality seen in O'Nolan's later English-language work, such as the Cruiskeen Lawn columns discussed here, and *The Dalkey Archive* in particular.

Another reason for suspecting O'Donnell to be another Flann pseudonym is that Brian O'Nolan would have been twenty-one years of age at the time 'Naval Control' was published, and this story bears all the hallmarks of having been written by a younger

author. The three 1932 stories by Brian Ó Nualláin re-printed in the *Short Fiction* collection have the same quality: the author is clearly a witty and intelligent young man (and he knows it), but in other ways he is still quite callow. Each is slightly off in terms of pacing, and each has a rather abrupt ending; these are both criticisms which could also be made of 'Naval Control.'

However, none of this amounts to anything more than speculation. It remains, as Carol Taaffe describes it in her review of *The Short Fiction*, 'a leap of faith'; there is every chance that there really was a John Shamus O'Donnell, and every assumption I have made about him could be completely wrong. It is an unnerving prospect to have egg on one's face when, as the Brother insists, 'the egg never dies' (CL, 13 February 1942). However, I would like to think that O'Nolan, a man of many pseudonyms, would get some perverse pleasure out of a critic chasing after a persona that was not one of his at all, like a hapless theatre-goer trying to identify a rogue ventriloquist.



*With the spiritual poise of a Lady of the Lake walking toward her Jorgen, she walked toward the ship and the sunset. . . .*

## Naval Control

By John Shamus O'Donnell

I AM in a saddened and unbearable state of melancholia. Four months ago today my Florence Minerva succumbed to the deadly fever of a South American jungle.

What a woman! I will never find another like her; she was the perfect helpmate. When I would be weary while working on my mining invention, she would spur me on with intensive spiritual quotations, and not only to me was she an inspiration.

To the natives she was a blessing. I firmly believe if she had lived another ten years she would have accomplished the full attire of at least half the female native population of Peru.

I remember now, as when we first arrived, looking about with a Napoleonic glint through her glasses at the shameless half

nude natives, how she struggled to moralize them in the early stages. She would no sooner get a native woman to drape herself more heavily, than one of the burly bucks would take it away from her, promenading through the village street with her drappings.

Overcoming all these obstacles, she had the village going Baptist with glorious hallelujahs, when she was stricken by fever, and we laid away my spiritual six foot Jeanne d'Arc.

I drifted back to my laboratory home at Beal Gulch outside of Oakland, California, on the Golden Gate, where I gaze at the fog-filtered sunsets and think with pensive sadness of my Florence Minerva.

I've tried the subterfuge of housekeepers and servants but they all seem such strangers in

*WHY, some of our readers have asked, do we take science fiction so seriously? Is there no humor in it? We think there is. But we want to hear from more of our readers about this story, which we are using as an experiment. We think it is very ingenious and cleverly worked out.*

141

*The first page of "Naval Control" as it appeared in Amazing Stories Quarterly, Winter 1932. Illustration by Morey.*

# Off the Rails – Flann on Track

by James Bacon, Train Driver

There is no doubt that when a journalist had some four thousand columns written, that the variety of subjects covered will be varied. This is especially likely to be so when that writer is Myles na gCopaleen, Flann O'Brien, or Brian O'Nolan, whose satirical eye was always looking at the operations of the larger companies and government for moments of humour and mirth, and so he cast his eye on T'Railways.

This is the first exploration of a subject that will no doubt expand, as I take a cursory look at some of the Railway Matters that our man Myles wrote about, both in his columns and in his fiction. It is important for fellow Steam People to understand that it is far from exhaustive—indeed, it is a good start, which is not at all halfway there. First I am looking at the output in the *Irish Times*, in his Cruiskeen Lawn columns, and in some fiction. I will continue this endeavour, but welcome feedback, and comment related to the railways.

On Wednesday 1 October 1941, Myles explained that he had been 'looking further into the problem of maintaining efficient railway services in these days of inferior fuel. My solution is expensive but highly ingenious.' The solution involved railway lines being laid along bog lands, and then the locomotives fitted with scoops, a patented apparatus, that would dig into the bog, and thence—after drying—the turf would be burned in the furnace, similar to the practice of water being collected by express trains. He recognises and explains the difficulties, such as express trains disappearing into the bowels of the earth, and the need for heavy trains to be preceded by light trains with a prodding apparatus. Issues include the lack of bogland between cities and unearthing hidden poteen and the subsequent explosion of said alcohol, but with gusto, it is clear that despite the Great Northern Railway (GNR) being unlikely to operate the scheme the Great Southern Railway is experimenting.

Wednesday 8 July 1942 saw Myles the Steam Man lamenting his treatment at Kingsbridge, when all he wanted to do was make his way south. The trains stuffed to the luggage racks with 'perspiring humanity' and when he asks if he can journey on the footplate, soon the whole station is aware of the potential trespass and damage this fella might wreak upon the engine should he be let near it. Myles then goes on to astutely identify faults with the locomotive and make some recommended reading and immediately one wonders, does he know his stuff and is this his way of pointing out the faults to the machinery?

Thursday 16 September 1943 began with 'Steel Track Minds' and Myles berates the people who have 'opinions' on Irish railway matters, mocking them. Comparing the grievances being ventilated with a process never attempted on the stuffy and bad condition third-class coaches. A letter is published, addressed from the 'Cabman's Shelter, Broadstone' which states that 'I make no jocose distinction as between steam and electric fans...' and continues into technical humour later as the letter asks, 'will you kindly let me know why my proposal for fitting Irish Locomotives with Thermic syphons was scotched by a board room ukase in 1919. Is it because these syphons are made of copper that my proposal was not accepted the vested tin-trusts?'

The critique is more detailed and indeed pointed in the column on Wednesday 6 October 1943, where Myles laments what he saw from Donabate Station platform and the 'dreadful mess into which our railways have been permitted to fall,' and talks about engine 493 and how it is in a deplorable state suffering badly from 'condensation.' He is appalled with the thousands of foot pounds lost to the drawbar and says 'It is all too dreadfully typical of the dawdling mentality that has made our name a by-word among steam men the world over.... The matter of the Slieve Gullion's valve ports, the Kestrel's chronic 'blowing' the scandal of the queen Maeve's piston valve lining' and continues to discuss the need of good emulsion to prevent an engine being choked with dirty feed water, something he mentions again.



*Slieve Gullion by Aubrey Dale*

Myles reports on Monday 15 November 1943 he had a discussion with some GNR chaps in a pub, which fell to discussion of the aforementioned 'Gullion,' which caused some embarrassment from the lads, and it seems that it was a recurring issue. Our man Myles questions whether this was a 'feed water' issue, whether it was a lack of use of the emulsion that Myles had prescribed, or piston valve timers. The mystery deepens for Myles and he wouldn't let it lie, asking questions until he got to the bottom of the matter through questions of corroboration and indeed, comes to the solution 'there is but one remedy. She must be reboilered' and this is met with fear, blanching, and drinking. Myles was clear it would not be about the money, of course.

The matter continued into the next day's column on Tuesday 16 November 1943. While reiterating that he will indeed need to reboiler the Gullion, Myles is concerned with the lack of modern drivers' concern for ailments and faults on their trains, dismissing them hopefully and not reporting them. While he plans to set up a Steam Clinic in the quiet stretches behind the North Strand where there will be

A little haven where the advice may be had on the intimate little troubles of our hardworking locomotives. No scolding, no questions, no 'why-was-this-allowed-to-happen?' And no snobbery. Must a man stay away because, forsooth, his charge is an undersized, dirty 2-4-2 tank, caked in coal dust and rattling in every bolt after a lifetime of shunting? Most certainly not. I will gladly see them all, and no disorder is too trivial. A great sickness begins with a small sickness. That is the watchword of modern locomotive therapy.

CIE—Córas Iompair Éireann—came in for mighty derision—on Tuesday 26 September 1944 the whole column was dedicated to applying some consideration to this new name. Myles described the name as literally looking like an engine pulling two bogie coaches, visually playing with the words. The new private Train Company, initially enacted as a Transport Monopoly by the Transport Act of 1944, combined the Great Southern Railway (GSR) Company and Dublin United Transport Company (DUTC) who operated buses. CIE was eventually nationalised in 1950.

The language is straight away the focus of attention, and an implied foreign ignorance of Irish allows for investigation onto what the philosophy of Latin might mean in the words, which result in an explanation that can be worked out as—North West Wind, balefully, vilely, shamefully, a collection for the poor.

There is issue in the same article as he pours scorn onto the monopoly that sees a lack of bus shelters and suggests that they use disused trams around Nelson's Pillar as waiting places.

Steam Men were a subject of interest, and Myles was quick to warn the layman not to use engineering terms that they were not really *au fait* with, as in a column about correspondence from two old steam men on Friday 8 September 1944.

Keats and Chapman had a time in the railway, unsurprisingly. On Wednesday 27 June 1945 they are employed as railway policemen watching the behaviour of staff, having failed to get the work of Station Masters, which they had expected, and so some lovely wordplay is offered. 'A long goods train approached, ignored the stop signal and steamed slowly past the cabin and disappeared up line which had been closed to accommodate an incoming express. Chapman was aghast. 'Did you see them?' he cried. 'The driver, fireman and guard were sitting on the floor of the engine playing cards!' Keats shrugged elaborately. 'Dulce est desipere in loco,' he murmured.'

The logo of CIE, as well as issues with it, are mentioned by Myles on Tuesday 19 March 1946 as he questions machines made abroad, and foreign oils. This was commentary on the push for buses, and many people of sense saw the decline of trams as a real issue, and short sightedness, and they were right, for the demise would see them resurrected decades later. DUTC had bought so many bus companies that it was their core business and buses were seen as cheaper. Such naivety. The CIE logo was portrayed at the top of the column being drawn by a horse. The next day the logo again is used, but in the image of a shooting gun. The column on Wednesday 20th March 1946 takes issue with the actions and whinging of the company.

The issue on Monday 27 June 1949 was one of duality. The weather was beautiful over the weekend, but there was a lack of trains for Dubliners to get to the seaside, and



Myles laments this major issue as it was because of a 'Pioneer' event at Croke Park. Another subject close to Myles's heart would be enjoying a drink, and he pours equal scorn on the sectarian group who swear abstinence from drink as well as their ability to curtail regular Dubliners from enjoying a trip to the seaside.

Steam Trains seemed to be of certain interest to Myles in regard to their comparison to humanity—indeed, one wonders if drivers on bumpy footplates could become trains themselves. On Wednesday 28 November 1945 he makes an interesting comparison between the efficiency of steam locomotives and the human body, the former being 8% efficient compared to the human, at 2%, and bemoaning how there is no scrap value on a body once one part of it is broken, and how it all goes to hell if one puts two bottles of whiskey into the stomach.

One unfortunate reader wrote to complain about what he thought were several factual inaccuracies in a column. O'Brien printed the letter and meticulously proved the correspondent wrong at every point. Where the correspondent complained that railway trains did not exist in 1800 (the period O'Brien was describing) O'Brien replied testily: 'Mr. Hogan questions my reference to railway trains. Here we are back to this incapacity to read. I had no reference whatsoever to railway trains, and no hint whatsoever about steam locomotion [...] Railways were used by Hannibal.' Strong stuff. Yet was this the same Hogan as edited *Envoy*, I wondered?

Friday 28 October 1949 saw CIE being taken to task over dieselisation. Now one would be wrong to think that Myles was a 'Steam Man' who would have nothing to do with diesel, when it is clear that he liked modernisation, but disliked being told that something was modern when it was not. He questions whether Double Deck buses are wise, and promotes the concept of Trolley Buses. This he says 'would be to put the citizens of Ireland into a different cart, for every summer the ESB would announce that owing to the level of the River Shannon, public transport would have to be 'suspended'.' Discussion follows regarding the process of diesel combustion, petrol combustion, and the expansion of steam. It is quite clear that Myles then goes on to speak and praise the 'terrific compression' and how one can get more work from a 'diesel engine'. He discusses the lack of volatility and storage potential over wood and coal and petrol. Myles was quite astute:

Steam transportation collapsed during the last war and will collapse again in the next. If Diesel-electric locomotives were used instead of steam locomotives and adequate oil storage provided, transport would be scarcely affected by war...it is really terrible to contemplate that war is necessary to convince CIE of this fact, or of the folly of continuing steam traction even in peace time.

...and continues to discuss the benefits from a very technical perspective especially pointing out that 'dirt, cinders and smoke' are eliminated and speaks well of diesel-powered trains running at 80mph in 1933 and how America uses diesel today for her trans-continental express. He then says, eyeing his mark carefully and clearly for the reader. 'CIE's policy on the matter? Four new diesel-electric engines are to be got rid of immediately. The reason? They are not economical! Did you ever hear the like of it?' This is inspired brilliance here now.

Ireland was not behind with railway ingenuity, indeed the Drumm Battery Train of 1932 was quite excellent in concept, an early electric multiple unit in service on the Dublin to Bray route. I admit I am not sure which diesel electric engines are being gotten rid of here. CIE went on to have an ambitious dieselisation programme, and Inchicore built five class D 0-6-0 diesel shunters in 1947 similar to the English Electric Class 11 and later Class 08. Yet these locomotives served until 1960, so it may have been a brief issue. More research is required.

### **Flann on the footplate**

One thing that really piqued my interest in this area was not just the amount of writing that was available but an image held by Boston University. It showed Flann in railway gear—now I do not mean a notebook and a strained look into the distance, I mean he was Fit for Duty in appropriate railway equipment. It really made me wonder.

And suddenly, Myles, Flann, Brian is no longer just a talker, he is something else. I reckoned he was a railfan. That like Dan Ackroyd who owns his own railcar, Joe Biden who travelled on them as much as possible and the famous Irish scientist Dionysius Lardner, who frequently challenged the great Brunel himself on my own Great Western Railway, and was frequently proved wrong, or Japanese academic Hyakken Uchida.

Nope. Yer man is a driver.

This is not to be trivialised. Walt Disney was a train driver, Kirsty Sando is a train driver (Driver of the Year Everywoman Awards 2016 and Business Impact Award—Association of Women Travel Executives 2016), and so was Flann.

From Cruiskeen Lawn Friday 11 November 1949:

### **The World of Steam**

In connection with its celebrations last Sunday. CIE got out a special centenary issue of its magazine *Cuisle ne Tire*. I would again recommend caution in using these Irish words. The title is intended to mean, we must assume, 'Artery of the Country' (or GSRtery?). Dr Dineen expresses certain views in his dictionary on the meaning of *cuisle*. One thing he says it means cannot be printed here. He also alleges that it means 'artery or vein' thus showing the word existed before the circulation of the blood was understood, although he says *cuisle* also means 'the blood,' probably venous as well as arterial blood. Not only does the word mean arm and wrist but at the end of the tunnel so to speak. We arrive at CIE's witty illumination of its function as a transport authority. Dinneen says that *cuisle* means 'part of horse's (or other quadrupeds) fore leg above the knee'. The horse of course, is the Iron Horse nowadays.

On Sunday last the present writer took turns driving Mr. Bredin's '800' Maedhbh locomotive from Dublin to Cork and passengers turns in the process (so I'm told!). I am preparing a treatise on the machine and the run but in the meantime must say I noticed several quite unnecessary speed restrictions on the line. Some are arbitrary and imposed by non-driver theorists. Some, which are justified are due to faulty superelevation on the curves.

Now, while we know that O'Brien was apt to a few words of fiction in his columns, I would have to say you'd look like a right fecking fool dressed as a train driver in the carriage of a

centenary trip and more so, you wouldn't have a photo in the five foot in front of a steaming locomotive in such a photo. The article continues and we see just how learned O'Brien was.

I also note from the *Railway Gazette* that Mr. OV Bulleid, CIE's Guest Conductor, was up to some extraordinary antics before he wisely fled from Britain. He designed a terrible monstrosity for British Railways. You remember my description of one old Chief Engineer who thought that a Garratt was the upper apartment of a lofty building and not an articulated loco.

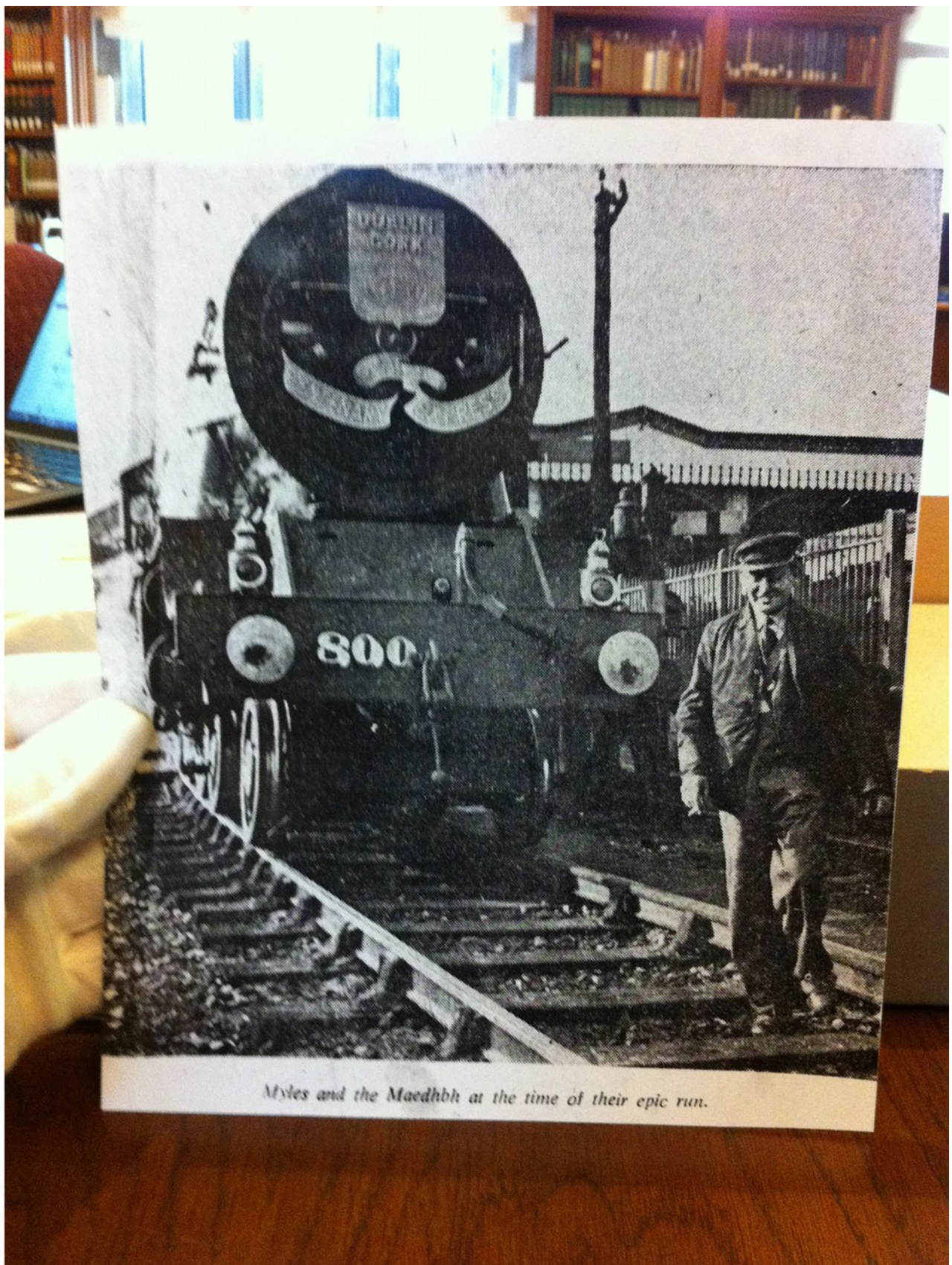
I will not go so far as to say that Bulleid never heard of the Garratt but he has had the extraordinary brainwave that there is no reason why garrets should be confined to houses... his prodigy has been to design a 'double-deck four coach train'. Externally the appearance of this train resembles the perforated roll of a player piano.

This is not at all a bad description of the Southern Railway Class 4DD, 2 sets of which entered service in 1949, and were as close to double deck trains as Britain's gauging could allow, and they ran in service until 1971. Conceived indeed by Bulleid, Myles goes on to make much comment about the springs and diameter of the wheels and the impact on those in the attic, and how second storeys could be useful above the locomotive cab for making tea and resting.



*GSR Class 800 Maedb, by Skimann*





*Myles and the Maedhbh at the time of their epic run.*

Oliver Vaughan Snell Bulleid was a serious railway man. He worked as Nigel Gresley's assistant on the Great Northern Railway, worked on the London and North Eastern Railway,

and helped Gresley design LNER Class U, a Beyer-Garratt Locomotive 2-8-0+0-8-2 built for banking coal trains over the Worsbrough Bank, of which only one was built. It was a monster at 87 ft 3 in and 178 long tons. So I wonder was knowledge at play here. At the time, Bulleid had finished with Southern Railway, having designed the The SR Merchant Navy class, The SR West Country, and SR Battle of Britain class air smoothed, rather than streamlined locomotives and then the Double Deckers as well as seeing in much electrification. He went to work for CIE.

Now OV Bulleid had gotten quite a mention already on Friday 7 October 1949. Indeed Myles talked about the question of emigration, dread national haemorrhage, of British emigration to Ireland and 'Can the tide not be stemmed.' He goes on to say that the latest foreign importation by Courtney Iompair Éireann...

Described as Chief Mechanical Engineer, Southern District, British Railways retd., Mr. OV Bulleid—or John Bulleid as I prefer to think of him—is too old to work for BR (or Broughton's Railways) and therefore qualifies to be the big boss at Inchicore. When Sean T. retires we may also manage to get Churchill into the Vice-Regal Lodge, from which at his old age, he may contemplate the Wellington Monument. Xenophilia, how are you?

Myles makes mention of the lack of Irish of Courtney and Bulleid and how he has expertise in the mechanically aided movements of the Irish. Myles continues to note that 'When Mr. Bulleid has become accustomed to our climate and to the unique labyrinth of intrigue and organised inefficiency that is CIE, he will find, to his astonishment, that he is himself of all things, a critical political issue.'

Myles then notes that Mr Bulleid will be invited to answer a variety of pertinent questions, fourteen in all.

1. Are you at heart a real Steam Man? 2. Do you belong to the 'full regulator, short cut off' school? [...] 9. Would you recommend a de Glehn compound embodying the Walschaerts gear for Irish roads? (Were the questions frivolous or personal, I would also ask whether he had ever read that parody I wrote of Synge, put on for two nights in the Dundalk Loco Sheds 1914 - In the Shadow of de Glehn.)

And the questions are indeed brilliant, and make one laugh. I do wonder if Bulleid was not made aware of the column and what he made of it, but as Myles laments the lack of knowledge of the Railway and how Courtney needs a retired english Gentleman to be paid £4,000 to distinguish a compound from a simple. Myles signs off, 'My own peculiarity? I refuse to be Bulleid'.

TC Courtney was Chairman of CIE And today the concierge for CIE's Tours international social media channel is Courtney. Nice to be remembered well.

And Bulleid designed a Turf Burning Locomotive. Now to find some words about that... surely it got a mention, given Myles penchant for locally sourced fuels.

On Friday 23 June 1950 a substantial article on T'Railways appeared. Myles took to discussing the inaugural diesel service of the Great Northern Railway to Belfast and seemed to take exception that he was not invited to join 'every class of press parakeet, all sorts of



queer fish off the evening news-papers, thooleramawns off the Connacht Tribune, gawskogues attached to the Dublin office of the Daily Express and so on.'

He goes on to explain that he was not invited because he is 'the only Pressman in all Ireland who understands Diesel engines...' He mocks the yachting pressman about their lack of knowledge of the cam-driven injector. He quite gets into it, and one wonders was he truly upset by not being invited. He continues: 'The GNR is supposed to be losing money but it can afford to pay *Diesel Railway Traction* a fat £500 for a blurb in the June issue' and laments why he has not been invited as he is 'forsooth, an unrepentant steam man, proud owner of 108,00 plate hours and therefore I would be bound to fault even the most heavenly diesel.' He then takes some fault with the GNR device, mocking its 'five-speed box' and laughing because 'the combustion chambers are toroidal'. Now, even today there is research using bio-diesel on the shapes of combustion chamber, and there have been cylindrical (CCC), trapezoidal (TrCC), and toroidal combustion chambers (TCC). So he is not altogether talking rubbish here, and the shape and geometry of the combustion chamber still agitates scientists and engineers today.

Myles goes on to quote quite a long piece of 'self praise from the GNR' which is a technical explanation of the mechanics involved in some level of detail, which he then says 'is indeed a skilful sneer.'

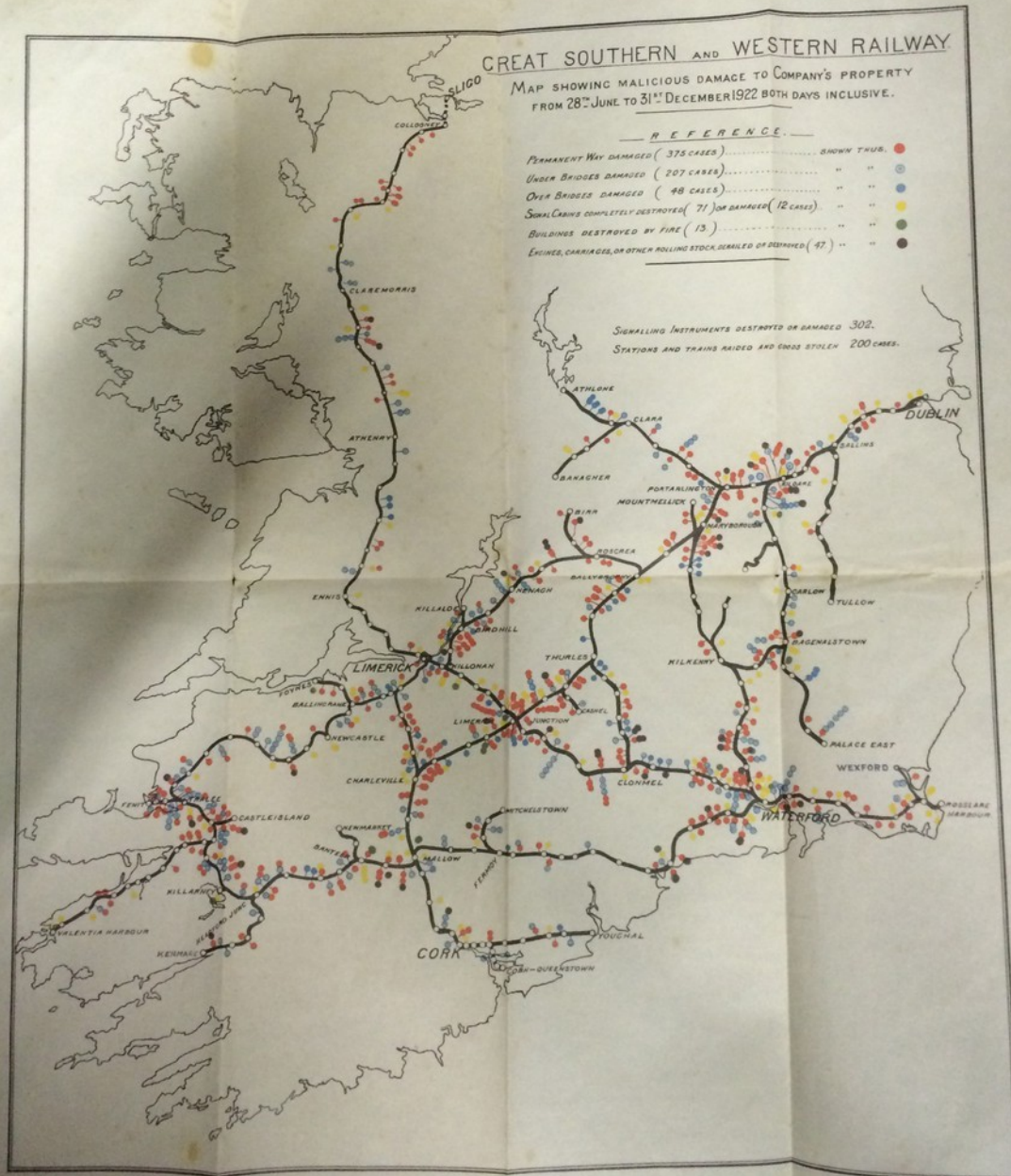
Once again he compares the elements of trains to humans for the sake of humour, by noting 'I was fitted with a spring loaded plunger-type relief valve, but that was back in nineteen and thirty one; I got the whole assembly taken out in nineteen and thirty four by Archers, the Ford crowd, and never had a day's indigestion since.' and how crankshaft—recte Krankshaft—was the German for illness.

The harsh words continue, and he goes on. 'The GNR brazenly claims credit for its Diesel Design. It is not a new design and is in fact a re-think of the old 1934 Armstrong-Saurer job with dual-turbulence engine. We are told in all seriousness by the blushing GNR savants, that a flywheel is incorporated in the fuel injection pump drive. To prove they are not fooling they hasten to explain that this flywheel 'smoothes out the impulses,' ie, the function of a flywheel. (Nobody was ever quite so insane as to design an injection system without a flywheel.)'

The language and spelling quickens, imitating a version of Irish in English that is parodying itself the Irish, as Myles takes apart the GNR's prideful boasts—'Musha, musha now—do you mind the cuteness of them. And who agraw a bookul ogue invented de masked inlet valve at all at all? Was it by any chance the Waukesia Motor Company of Waukesia, Wisconsin in 1939... By gob we are certainly getting very modern for ourselves in this country'

This continues and then there is what one might consider the *coup de grace* as he really gets going;

The GNR Diesel Machine has one prominent obsolete feature, several obsolescent, and the company is afraid of its life to let me have a proper look at it, let alone drive it... In my own country I am regarded as a gob-hawk... it seems immaterial whether the GNR Gadarene career to bankruptcy is powered by steam or diesel. The destination is constant, I'm on my way myself and I'll be there first.



*The Great Southern and Western Railway route map*

You will understand, that upon my first reading of this article, I was laughing out loud, whether he is an expert or not, he does a good job of seeming to possess expertise and use it to mock the GNR readily, obviously the issues of the day around how Railway Companies were run was a major issue, and Myles was not to know that less than ten years later, the GNR south of the border would be enacted and merged into the State-owned CIE.

The diesel railcars introduced were AEC built and engined vehicles for the GNR following on from the success that the Great Western Railway had in the UK with similar vehicles. A four car set with two intermediate trailers rebuilt from hauled carriages was designed as an 'Enterprise' Belfast to Dublin service, and the interior was finely proportioned.

Myles's expertise, whilst hilarious, did have some repercussions. One could imagine the management of the GNR being quite annoyed by the type of coverage, so many column inches, damning them, and I am certain this was then looked at with the eye of vengeance rather than with robust acceptance of humour. One wonders how the GNR could vent their anger—and it is pure speculation on my part, that questions whether men stood around and plotted, and then sought redress. My speculation is fuelled by an apology in the *Irish Times* on 12 July 1950, in an article titled 'Diesel Railway Traction'.

In our issue of June 23rd, the following statement was made by Myles na gCopaleen in one of his articles under the heading of 'Cruiskeen Lawn'—'The GNR is supposed to be losing money, but it can afford to pay *Diesel Railway Traction* a fat £500 for a blurb in the June issue.'

Manifestly, this remark was not intended to be taken seriously, as ought to be clear from the context in which it was written, but the publishers of *Diesel Railway Traction* have taken exception to it on the ground that it is entirely false and likely to cause them harm and loss of prestige in their business.

They went on to assure *Diesel Railway Traction* that Myles was light-hearted, and did not intend to do any damage, and that the *Irish Times* regretted that they felt aggrieved or embarrassed by the offending article. *The Railway Gazette* published *Diesel Railway Traction* between 1933 and 1964, obviously Myles had done the damage that saw the publications eventual demise.

Myles ponders the miniature and the fascination in it on Monday 8 May 1950, and speaks about the Fry Model Railway that had been on display by CIE at the Spring Show. As ever the article is needling CIE: 'This was immensely popular with old and young. Strong men who had spent an hour cursing in a real train from Bray earlier in the day became beaming cherubs in the presence of the tiny model railway.' The column drifts into language and Irish words and onwards, but these were kind words about the Fry Model Railway.

To two items of fiction. In *John Duffy's Brother* we see a man who is inflicted with a mental ailment and thinks and behaves as a pastiche of a train. It is quite extraordinary in a way, and shows a level of understanding for the human psyche in a moment of stress. Now, I came across this in *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, edited by Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper and noted that it was written in 1940 and is quite surreal, as well as featuring trains. Oddly though it leaves a question in the mind of the reader regarding the incident arising from an imperfect understanding of the sexual relations as background. Was some of the railway enthusiasm innuendo? Not at all hard to do or contemplate.

I was exceptionally pleased to see this has been delightfully filmed and the work on screen does the story considerable benefit, with a sense of sadness and even

understanding for Duffy's brother, who is probably having a mental breakdown of some sort. Funded by Filmbase / RTÉ Short Film Award scheme, directed by Mikel Murfi, adapted by Eoghan Nolan, and produced by Anne Marie Naughton, it is readily available on the Filmbase Ireland website: <http://filmbase.ie/short-film-john-duffys-brother>



I loved the film, for it begins with footage of a Hornby Dublo 3 rail railway set with metal model station, and moves then to Henrietta Street and the portrayal of the 9.20 into Dublin is so well done and I admit a small amount of sympathy as actor Mark O'Halloran plays John Duffy's brother quietly with a bike standing next to a train track.

In the short-lived literary magazine *Envoy*, John Ryan invited Brian O'Nolan to be a guest editor for the April 1951 issue, which was to focus on James Joyce. O'Nolan wrote 'A Bash in the Tunnel.'

This story is about the son of a caterer who supplies Córas Iompair Éireann with the food and drink for the restaurant cars. The son has access to the trains with a key, and he proceeds to let himself in, and takes some whiskey into the WC whereupon he locks himself in, and then the restaurant car gets shunted about, being prepared for use, and frequently in this instance not being used. While the story seems to begin in Heuston Yard, he soon ends up in the Phoenix Park tunnel, with no idea of the time, and he is quite angry with the behaviour of the shunters, as he sips stolen whiskey.

Funny? But surely there you have the Irish artist? Sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach [...] drinking somebody else's whiskey, being whisked hither and thither by anonymous shunters, keeping fastidiously the while on the outer face of his door the simple word ENGAGED? I think the image fits Joyce: but particularly in his manifestation of a most Irish characteristic—the transgressor's resentment of the nongressor.



And O’Nolan might not be wrong here. Joyce was not at all happy with the Irish and many feel the same way about him. The Plain People of Ireland, properly burdened by the knowledge that they have not read his book, annoyed at their own inability to conquer what is considered a pinnacle of literature, and despite good English, frequently fail upon the foothills of confusing language and grammar or are just not able to heft this weighty tome for fear.

It is indeed like trying to breathe on top of Everest. You not only need a Sherpa to guide you there, but the lack of oxygen will kill you, likewise mere English ability is not sufficient and anger and resentment at it all is surely slightly unfortunate: Joyce doesn’t force us to read his work—is he the ultimate non-aggressor, and regular readers like myself destined to fail at this literary achievement raise a physical fist at the poor fella.



*Kestrel's sister engine Merlin. by Manfred Kopka*

**Notes to readers:** The railway organisations in Ireland included the Great Northern Railway Ireland, which had Ireland on its crest, titled Great Northern Railway (Ireland) (GNR(I) or GNRI) in many publications. Myles does not add the Ireland to his references, which is absolutely fine, but Bulleid worked for the GNR in Britain, an altogether different company.

Myles spoke a lot about Compounds and Simples and damage to trains due to a lack of knowledge or expertise. The GNR Slieve Gullion, an S Class Locomotive built in 1912,

suffered damage such as broken crank shafts, hot axel boxes, connecting rod problems and boiler tube issues, because she was pushed beyond her limits, too much power being required and too much pressure being allowed. They were the passenger express locomotives on the Belfast to Dublin route.

Number 87 Kestrel was one of five Class V locomotives that were were the first three-cylinder compound locomotives in Ireland and were known as 'The Compounds' that took over from the Class S and S2 when built in 1932. Like the S Class the demanding timetable saw severe maintenance problems and the intended boiler pressure had to be reduced and so 20% tractive effort was lost.

The five GNR Class VS of 1948 were very like the V Class, but had only simple expansion steam engines with Walschaerts valve gear. Otherwise many parts were exchangeable between the V and VS classes of engine.



*Writer James Bacon contemplates the mysteries of the universe.*

# Object Found in a Book II:

## The Brochure

Pádraig Ó Méalóid

The publication of *The Best of Myles* by MacGibbon and Kee in September 1968 marked the beginning of—and probably the high point of—the final phase of publication of work by Flann O’Brien, all of which, by its nature, was posthumous. It probably would not have even existed if it hadn’t been for the publication in March 1967 of *The Third Policeman*, arguably Flann’s greatest novel, which had been written in 1940, but still unpublished by the time of his death in April 1966.

This copy is a first edition, published as *The Best of Myles—A Selection from ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’* by MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, 3 Upper James Street, Golden Square, London W1 in 1968. The book is indicated as being Copyright © Evelyn O’Nolan 1968. Evelyn was Flann’s wife, and it is my firm opinion that his lasting fame rests on her efforts after his death to get, first *The Third Policeman*, and subsequently collections of his work on the Cruiskeen Lawn column in the Irish Times, which ran more or less continuously from 1940 to 1966, into print, and before the general public.

My recollection is that I bought this copy for around £25 on eBay, and that there was no mention in the listing of the brochure from MacGibbon and Kee which was included therein—and certainly no mention of the intriguing receipt from John Menzies (Holdings) Ltd of Snowfield in London to Mr N McMillan of the Chartered Bank in Hamburg in the then West Germany. The brochure, although the less romantic of the two, represents a physical embodiment of the beginning of a renewed interest in the work of Flann O’Brien, which really began with the publication of *The Third Policeman*, and was solidly cemented into place a year and a half later by the publication of this collection, allowing a wider interest in Flann’s work, and a more benign marketplace for further collections, for all that they were never to be as good as this first one. The brochure represents a point where we launched into a posthumous, post-novel writing version of Flann and his writing, a long tail that is still ekeing itself out today, to a still willing audience.

There is one other noteworthy matter, to my mind, in the book. It is edited by, and introduced by, the author’s brother Kevin. Given that the author was, in his civvies, Brian O’Nolan, you’d have thought that his brother would have been named Kevin O’Nolan. But this is not so. Throughout the bits of the book he is mentioned in, and subsequently in more recent iterations of this same book, his name is given as Kevin O Nolan, with no apostrophe between that O and the initial capital letter of the rest of the surname. Given how many different variants Flann himself had used of his given surname, I suppose all we can do is applaud Kevin for managing to find one that hadn’t already been used...



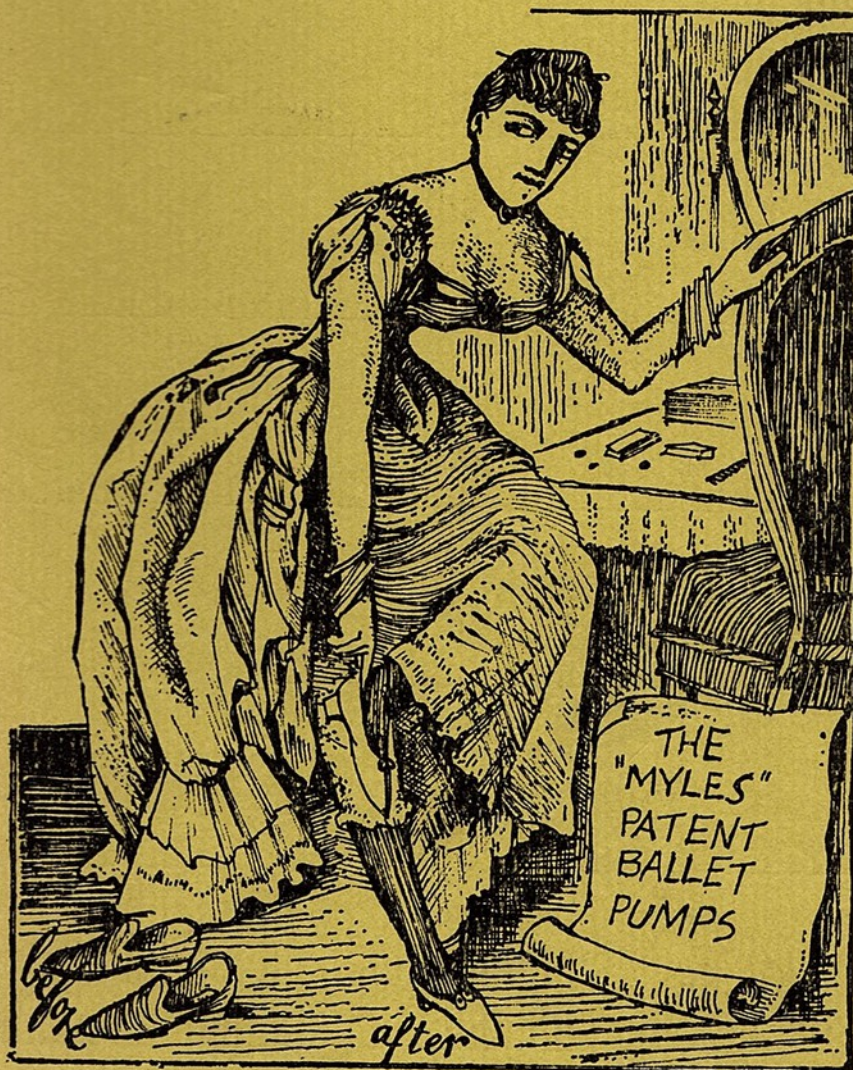
Myles na Gopaleen  
(Flann O'Brien)

# THE BEST OF MYLES

## Myles na Gopaleen

(Flann O'Brien)

THE BEST OF MYLES



mk

By the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds*



S. J. PERELMAN said of this book: 'I'm sure you're familiar with his novels like *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Dalkey Archive*. But I'm thinking particularly of the columns O'Nolan wrote for the *Irish Times* up to his death, and which I understand are about to be published as a book. I have gotten enormous pleasure the last couple of years since the *Irish Times* has been reviving his columns. I think that they are delightful and I've been circulating them around to friends of mine, like Ogden Nash and so forth, and we all agree that this work has tremendous quality.' (from a TV Interview between Mr Perelman and Bernard Levin, Rediffusion Television Ltd, London, May 1967.)

## About the author

Brian O'Nolan was invited to begin his 'Cruiskeen Lawn' column for the *Irish Times* by the late Robert Smyllie, then editor. It was originally written in Irish and English, on alternate days. As 'Flann O'Brien' he had written two novels that now command increasing attention. He was born in 1911 in Co. Tyrone and died in Dublin on 1st April 1966. A resident of Dublin, he graduated from University College in that city.

He became a senior Civil Servant but his noteworthy though not very rewarding career as a writer extended from his student days through his years in the Service and the years following his resignation.

The name of 'Myles na Gopaleen' (or 'gCopaleen') was originally used in a novel by Gerald Griffin, 'The Collegians'. It is to be found also in Dion Boucicault's masterpiece, 'The Colleen Bawn' and Sir Julius Benedict's opera, 'Lily of Killarney'. Though it was normally translated as Myles of the Little Horses, the author used to insist the name should be Myles of the Ponies, saying that the autonomy of the pony must not be subjugated by the imperialism of the horse.



# Flann O'Brien Myles na Gopaleen





Brian O'Nolan  
'Flann O'Brien'  
'Myles na Gopaleen'

Brian O'Nolan was born in Tyrone in 1911 and died in Dublin in 1966. After a brilliant career as a student at University College, Dublin (where he edited a magazine called *Blather*), Mr O'Nolan became a senior civil servant, though he resigned later.

James Joyce was deeply interested in O'Nolan's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and praised the author as 'a real writer with the true comic spirit'. But being published just before the war began, that work of purest fun and scholarship never got the reading it deserved. It went 'underground' until eventually re-issued in 1960, when its fullness of achievement began to be recognised widely. For many years he wrote the hilarious column in the *Irish Times* under the name of Myles na Gopaleen – a legend even to hardened newspapermen.

*Drawing of the author by Sean O'Sullivan, R.H.A.*

## At swim-two-birds

GRAHAM GREENE wrote: 'A book in a thousand. It is in the line of *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*; its amazing spirits do not disguise the seriousness of the attempt to present, simultaneously as it were, all the legendary traditions of Ireland – the Celtic legend (in the stories of Finn), the popular adventure novels (of a Mr Tracy), the nightmare element as you get it in Joyce, the ancient poetry of Bardic Ireland and the working-class poetry of the absurd Jem Casey. On all these the author imposes the unity of his own humorous vigour, and the technique he employs is as efficient as it is original.'

'We have had books inside books before now, and characters who are given life outside their fiction, but O'Brien takes Pirandello and Gide a long way further; the screw is turned until you have (a) the narrator writing a book about Trellis who is, (b) writing a book about certain characters who, (c) are turning the tables on Trellis by writing about him. It is a wild, fantastic, magnificently comic notion, but looking back afterwards one realises that by no other method could the realistic, the legendary and the novelette have been worked in together.'

*Fourth impression*



## The Hard Life

‘Mr O’Brien’s almost callous economy of language, combined with an odd moral sensitivity, renders beastliness truly beastly but also completely funny.’

Simon Raven

‘His gifts are a wild combination of inventiveness about people and situations, wit in language and repartee, and a boisterous eagerness to enter wholeheartedly into a farcical chronicle of events. *The Hard Life* seems to be even funnier than *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a real broth of a book, yet one where the set pieces of high humour go into violence, farcical violence maybe, but searing because one has come to regard the characters as so attractive.’

Mary Holland

## The Dalkey Archive

‘An extraordinary second subject is the discovery of James Joyce, still alive, but now practising silence, exile and cunning as a bar curate in Co Dublin. *Finnegans Wake* is unknown to him and *Ulysses* he disowns with horror; but he confesses to a small collection of “Dublin characteristics” and some pamphlets written for the Catholic Truth Society.’

W. L. Webb

## The Third Policeman

Just published:

‘Now that *The Third Policeman* has appeared, it takes its place beside *At Swim-Two-Birds*, leaving both *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, remarkable as they are, to take a somewhat subordinate place, a few paces to the rear.’

Irish Times

‘*The Third Policeman*, published now for the first time, proves belatedly that Flann O’Brien is not a one-good-book man, or even James Joyce’s man. He was simply very much his own man with an effervescent comic talent. Like the best Irish writers, he was melodious even when he was clearing his throat; he was nothing less than dazzling when he performed in all his Sunday finery.’

Time Magazine

‘Most of the book is conveyed in wildly funny dialogue. One of O’Brien’s gifts was the power to exercise a peculiarly Irish capacity for pursuing any idea to its logical end. His sense of comedy is an unfailing delight.’

Sunday Times

‘The novel of the week, if not the month, or year. It is a triumph of a book whose use of language, rich, bold and exuberant, should make the English glad they have the Irish there to exploit it.’

Queen

2nd Impression



## Announcing **The Best of Myles**

S. J. PERELMAN 'The best comic writer I can think of.'  
This large selection, edited by the author's brother, Kevin O Nolan, has been taken from the earlier sequences of the column that Brian O'Nolan wrote under the name of Myles na Gopaleen (or gCopaleen). It contains work written about the same time as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, when the author was at the height of his powers. The editor has grouped certain themes together: Keats and Chapman; The Research Bureau; For Steam Men etc. etc. One section will largely be in Irish, since the original alternated between the two languages.  
The name of 'Myles na Gopaleen' was originally used in a novel, *The Collegians* by Gerald Griffin. It was used also in Dion Boucicault's masterpiece, *The Colleen Bawn* and in Sir Julius Benedict's opera, *Lily of Killarney*. Though usually translated as 'Myles of the Little Horses', Brian O'Nolan used to insist the name should be 'Myles of the Ponies', saying that the autonomy of the pony must not be subjugated by the imperialism of the horse.

September 1968     Illustrated

## In preparation **The Poor Mouth**

A translation from the Irish (*An Béal Bocht*)

This translation will introduce the world's readers (except the Irish, who already have it available) to the enchanted land of Corka Dorky – a land of Gaelic might-have-been. Though its first publication in Dublin brought down a certain amount of wrath on the author's head, the book survived.

1969

## **Stories and Plays** (provisional title)

Besides a number of masterly stories, this volume will also contain some chapters from an unfinished novel, *The Great Sago Saga*, as well as the text of a play first produced at the Abbey Theatre, *Faustus Kelly*.

1969

# Order form

to Bookseller

## Please supply

- copies of At Swim-Two-Birds  
at 30s + 1s 6d
- copies of The Hard Life  
at 15s + 1s 6d
- copies of The Dalkey Archive  
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- copies of The Third Policeman  
at 25s + 1s 6d
- copies of The Best of Myles  
at 50s (approx) + 1s 6d
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- copies of Stories and Plays  
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Best of myles.

L. 28/12/70.

# Single Narrow Gold Band: Flann's Pen

James Bacon

I quite like fountain pens, and have a small collection, and use them for day to day. They are nice writing implements, and writing a letter with a fountain pen that flows is a joy and pleasure and people love to see them, both letters and fountain pens.

I learned that Boston University had purchased the belongings of Brian O’Nolan and ensconced them in the Burns Library for safe keeping and research during sometime in the 1980s. I was fascinated that they listed all the belongings, and amongst the hat and wallet, notebooks and ledgers of newspaper clippings, I noted there was a pen. A fountain Pen. His pen.

And so began research. I contacted the University, and Shelly Barber soon was in contact and helping me. Shelly took some photos of the pen. It was a Conway Stewart, black, with a single band. The photo was fantastic, but there was something missing – the number.



*Flann's pen. Note broken clip.*

All Conway Stewart pens have an identifying number, along with the company logo. Yet the indentation can be so slight that it is very hard to see, even in good light; and such was the case with these photos. No one was sure of the make, let alone model of this pen at the University.

The world's online Conway Stewart expert was Jonathan Donahaye, but he passed away a number of years ago. However, he kindly left a huge website, cataloguing and photographing the hundreds of pens this English company produced:

**[jonathandonahaye.conwaystewart.info](http://jonathandonahaye.conwaystewart.info)**

Soon I discovered the joy of the Conway Stewart numbering system, in that there was actually no system at all. I considered carefully the bands on the lid, as these seemed to differ both in number and width variety. The pen I was after had one band.



*Conway Stewart 15*



Soon though, I was flummoxed. The cap was wrong for a 45, which was flat. Could it be a 15, which was issued with one or no band? The 1968 70 looked too tapered, and I thought the 75 from 1957 to 1963 had a silver band. This made me question the colour of the band in the photo, surely it was gold.



*Conway Stewart 85*

Could it be the 85 from 1956, or perhaps a 115, which was an export version of the 85? This made sense, as a pen purchased in Ireland would be an export. Although, then again, Ireland has been seen in a different light by British companies. The 150 was too tapered and nearly too late, and the 386 once again had a flat cap.

Eventually I decided it must be the Conway Stewart 28 and Jonathan had the details:

28 (The) Conway Stewart: (1949-63? SH) 1 narrow band, diamond clip, nib CS 5, (matching pencil The Conway No. 25), The Conway Stewart, number on 2nd line, short clip - early; Conway Stewart, number on 1st line - late. Dimensions - Length: 13cm; barrel+section: 9.7cm; cap: 6cm. (Original Price 24/6).

It looked right, but then so did a couple of others, and the more I looked at it, the less sure I was. Could it be a 14, with the single gold band? I was not sure.

So I bought one. A Conway Stewart 28, and it writes like a dream.

The gamble had been made, and I was content to write away, although I was surprised at how often I had to refill the pen. The pen in possession of the University was in a Parker pen box, which made little sense, but I decided the best way to sort it out was to visit the archive at the University and investigate for myself.



*Flann's pen with the number visible*

They were ready for me when I arrived, although I then produced another 100 odd items that I wanted to look at for Pádraig Ó Méalóid as well as myself, and that stunned them a bit. I had gone from being the 'pen man' to the researcher who wanted to see many things, including items from the vaults. It was a fun and fabulous day, and Shelly, Rebecca and Andrew looked after me exceptionally well in the lovely surroundings of the Library.

Sure enough, when I got to the pen, it was a Conway Stewart 28. Totally identical to my own, although well worn and indeed not in as good shape. It was lovely. I studied and photographed it, and it was nice to behold. I am sure if he were alive, O'Nolan would stab

me with it. He didn't suffer people gladly, and I am certain his disdain for me would be hilarious or deadly, and he'd call me a gobshite and an eejit. Or maybe that is unfair, and I'd get to offer him a pint as a counter thrust.

Of course, then Pádraig Ó Méalóid found another pen reference. In *Myles, Portraits of Brian O'Nolan* (Flann O'Brien/Myles Na Goplaeen, ed. Timothy O'Keefe), Kevin O Nolan (note no apostrophe there) writes on page 30:

"Our father died suddenly in 1937. Brian asked for his pen, a very old Waterman which he had used all his life. The hand changed but the pen wrote on."

And so, I still must find out about this pen.



*Parker Box containing Flann's pen*

# **The Cardinal and/or the Corpse: an Exegesis of Rumour**

or

## **The Revelation of Stephen Blakesley**

or

## **The Blakes Go Cycling In**

or

## **The Writer, the Dealer, the Cardinal, and the Corpse: A Literary Whodunnit**

or

## **Is This the Real life? Is This Just Flanntasy?**

[Probably not this one...]

**by Pádraig Ó Méalóid**

Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* begins with the lines,

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.

It is very hard to resist the temptation to mimic that opening in writing anything about Flann O'Brien in my *own* spare-time literary activities; to have several beginnings—and any amount of endings.

So: I have a particular place in my heart for the work of Flann O'Brien, and everyone in Ireland, give or take, knows that his real name is Brian Ó Nualláin, or Brian O'Nolan in English. Except that that's not entirely true. The family surname, although it was always Ó Nualláin in Irish, was originally Nolan in English, not O'Nolan, the O' being attached in the

aftermath of the Gaelic League's pushing for a revival of Irish language and culture in the 1890s. So even from an early age Flann was used to a certain mutability, a certain slipperiness, in his external identity. He would later write as Myles na Gopaleen, a name plucked from Dion Boucicault's 1860 play *The Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen* and also from Gerald Griffin's *The Collegians*, but he also wrote as Brother Barnabas, Lir O'Connor, George Knowall, and many more names as well, some of which are known, but with yet more undoubtedly still waiting to be discovered. (And perhaps he used one or more of those names to write short crime novels for the mushrooming British post-war pulp paperback market.) What we do know—or at least *think* we know—is that, except for some very early newspaper work in the Irish language, it seems that he never wrote under any of the variations of his own name. [As I later found out, this is complete nonsense. PÓM]

Flann O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, published by Longman, Green & Co, London in March 1939, attracted praise from the likes of Graham Greene, who was working as a reader for Longman's, and later from a self-exiled James Joyce in Paris, just two years before his death. At the age of twenty-seven O'Brien's star seemed to be on the ascendant, and he assured all his friends in Dublin that his next work, the as-yet unnamed and unpublished *The Third Policeman*, was better. However, it was rejected with the note, 'We realize the author's ability but think that he should become less fantastic and in this new novel he is more so.' His agents tried a few other publishers, but nobody was biting. He covered this up by telling his friends that it was no longer in his possession, misplaced variously by stupidity, loss, or misadventure: he had left it behind in the Dolphin Hotel on Essex Street; it was lost on a train; it had blown away, a page at a time, out of the boot of his car while he was driving through Donegal. The truth was, however, more prosaic: the manuscript sat unseen in a drawer in one home or another for over a quarter of a century, until after his death, when it finally saw print, and secured his legacy forever.

To add to his troubles Longman's London premises were destroyed during a bombing raid by the Luftwaffe, destroying all unsold copies of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. A potentially glittering literary career that at the beginning of 1939 had seemed unstoppable had less than two years later been ground to a halt.

O'Brien had not stopped writing, however: he had begun his Cruiskeen Lawn column in the *Irish Times* on 4 October, originally under the name of An Broc (The Badger), but from the second column on he wrote as Myles na gCopaleen, a name further tweaked to Myles na Gopaleen in the 1950s and under which name it ran until his death in 1966. He also published a short novel in Irish, *An Béal Bocht*, under the name of Myles, and had a play, *Faustus Kelly*, as Flann, performed in the Abbey Theatre in 1943, but it would not be until 1961 that he would have another novel published in English, when MacGibbon and Kee of London published *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor*, followed by *The Dalkey Archive* in 1964, for which O'Brien had cannibalised parts of *The Third Policeman*. (Sadly, neither of these books are terribly good, and would not be missed, at least by me, if they had never existed.)

*The Cardinal and the Corpse (or A Funny Night Out)*, a 40-minute semi-documentary made in 1992 by Christopher Petit and Iain Sinclair for a late-night slot on Channel 4, and rather



prosaically underdescribed in George Khoury's *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore* as 'a show about books and bibliophiles in London' muddies the pseudonymous O'Brien waters further.

When I first watched it, I had no idea what was going on in *The Cardinal & the Corpse*, or who most of the people in it—with the exception of Alan Moore and British science fiction writer Michael Moorcock—were. It seemed to be a story with several beginnings, several different threads running through it, none of which I had the slightest understanding of. The 'documentary' supposedly has three main streams, or quests as they are called, but it is the third one—The Flann O'Brien Sexton Blakes—I became fixated on, the more I watched it.

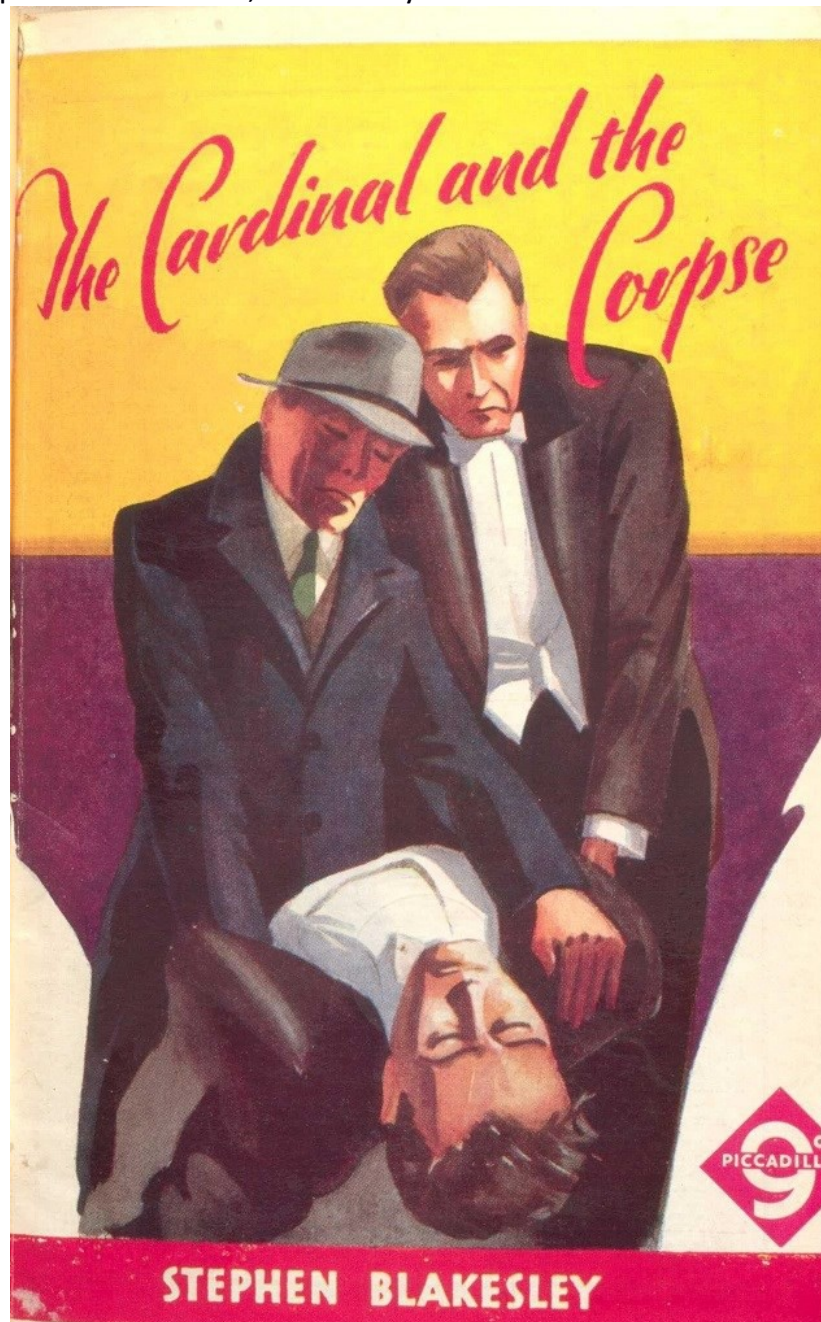
In the course of the action, we see husband and wife book dealers Gerry & Pat Goldstein rummaging through tables of books at one of the London markets. Pat Goldstein pulls out a handful of pulp novels, looks at them, and says that they are 'Sexton Blakes by different writers.' During the remainder of the documentary, we manage to get enough of a look at these to at least see the titles of several—and possibly all—of them: *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, *The Case of the Alpha Murders*, *The Riddle of the Blazing Bungalow*, *Broken Toy*, *The Blonde and the Boodle*, *The Frightened People*, and *Espresso Jungle*. We also see one of the standout characters in the whole show lurking in the background, a book dealer called Driffield, who is making a mysterious phone call—where he tells the person he is speaking to, 'I'm down here with Pat and Gerry. They just picked up some Sexton Blakes. *The Cardinal and the Corpse*—I remember you telling me once that Flann O'Brien had something to do with that.'

Later on, the Goldsteins have sold their finds to The Charing Cross Road Bookshop, where we once again see Driffield skulking, this time behind a bookcase, emerging once the couple have left, to buy the Sexton Blake books for himself. Then he's on the phone again saying, 'I've got some things you might be interested in. Flann O'Brien originals—not recorded in the bibliography. No one's ever seen them other than me. Stephen Blakesley—*The Case of the Alpha Murders*, *The Cardinal and the Corpse*.'

Had Flann O'Brien written these? If so, why hadn't I heard of them before? Well, there was a lot I hadn't heard of, I was finding, and he had specifically said that they weren't in the bibliography. I did the only thing I could: I went looking on the internet, back then in 2009. A search for 'Sexton Blake / *The Cardinal and the Corpse*' returned nothing, leading me to believe that they'd made the whole thing up, and that should have been that. But for some reason it wasn't. I looked at the thing a few more times, and did a few more searches. Time marched on, and more and more information found its way onto the internet, in the meantime. When I finally had enough sense to do a targeted search for just '*The Cardinal and the Corpse*,' I got a result. There *had* been a book called *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, and the author was given as Stephen Blakesley, just as they'd said. Perhaps there was something to it after all. To cut a long story of late-night Google searches on the internet mercifully short, I figured out that an author going by the name of Stephen Blakesley had produced eight titles between 1946 and 1952. Some of these were Sexton Blake titles, too. So at least some of what was in Sinclair and Petit's TV programme was true.

Sexton Blake was a fictional detective, who lived in Baker Street, the same as Sherlock

Holmes, and while George Newnes's *The Strand Magazine* published Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Final Problem* in 1893—in which Sherlock Holmes apparently fell to his death at the Reichenbach Falls along with Professor Moriarty—issue six of Chapellizod man Alfred Harmsworth's *The Half-penny Marvel* published *The Missing Millionaire* by Hal Meredith, the very first appearance of Blake, the same year.



Blake worked as a consulting detective, much like Sherlock Holmes, had a sidekick, in the person of Tinker, originally a boy, then later a young man, a faithful hound called Pedro, and a bullet-proof Rolls-Royce, named The Grey Panther. He was a bit more of a physical detective than a cerebral one, though, and this may have been part of his appeal to his intended Penny Dreadful audience. Before long there were Sexton Blake stories—either stand-alone stories or serialised ones—appearing in *The Half-penny Marvel*, *The Union Jack*, and *Pluck*, and in numerous others also. Blake was hugely popular, and there have

been something in the region of 4,500 stories written about him, by around two hundred writers, an awful lot of them under various pseudonyms and generic house names.

Besides the fact that the publisher was a Dublin man, there are many other connections between Blake and Ireland. The first serialised Sexton Blake story, *The Lamp of Death*, which ran in *Illustrated Chips* in twenty-one weekly parts between December 1894 and May 1895, was attributed to a Patrick Morris, actually a member of the Irish landed gentry called William De Montmorency, 6th Viscount Mountmorres. Other Irishmen also wrote stories over the years: William Howard Baker from Cork, who wrote stories as W Howard Baker, Peter Saxon, William Arthur, WA Ballinger, Richard Williams, and Desmond Reid, and took over the editorship of the SBL in 1956; Wilfred McNeilly, a Scots-born Ulsterman, who wrote a baker's dozen of Blake stories under various names, including his own, and who died in 1983 after over-celebrating a just-signed six-book contract; and Cathal O Sándair, who had a huge following in his day as a writer of all sorts of adventure stories in Irish for both adults and children, and wrote a single Sexton Blake book, *Bullets are Trumps*, which was published under the house name of Desmond Reid, but which had been submitted under the name of A. Cahill. There's even a rumour that Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany wrote some Blake stories, but this has proved impossible to verify. Mostly, though, the stories were written by a small clique of British writers, under several commonly-used pseudonyms.

So, what evidence is there that Flann O'Brien wrote any Blake stories? On the face of it, there appears to be lots of it, overwhelming amounts, actually, both from himself and others. First of all, there's a letter he sent the then-popular writer Ethel Mannin in July 1939 along with a copy of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The correspondence, although brief, is in itself fascinating, with references to various side characters who may or may not have been mutual acquaintances of Flann and Mannin. Once she had read the book, though, Mannin didn't like it, and said so, prompting the obviously thin-skinned Myles to write back to her, full of bluster, including these closing paragraphs,

It is a pity you did not like my beautiful book. As a genius, I do not expect to be readily understood but you may be surprised to know that my book is a definite milestone in literature, completely revolutionises the English novel and puts the shallow pedestrian English writers in their place. Of course I know you are prejudiced against me on account of the IRA bombings.

To be serious, I can't quite understand your attitude to stuff like this. It is not a pale-faced sincere attempt to hold the mirror up and has nothing in the world to do with James Joyce. It is supposed to be a lot of belching, thumb-nosing and bellylaughing and I honestly believe that it is funny in parts. It is also by way of being a sneer at all the slush which has been unloaded from this country on the credulous English although they, it is true, manufacture enough of their own odious slush to make the import unnecessary. I don't think you dictum about 'making your meaning clear' would be upheld in any court of law. You'll look a long time for clear meaning in the Marx Brothers or even Karl Marx. In a key I am preparing in collaboration with Mr Kevin O'Connor, it is explained that the reader should begin on p. 145 and then start at the beginning when he reaches the end like an up-&-down straight in Poker. The fantastic title (which has brought a lot of fatuous inquiries to bird-fanciers) is explained on p. 95 and is largely the idea of my staid old-world publishers. My

own title was 'Sweeny in the Trees'. I am negotiating at present for a contract to write 6 Sexton Blake stories (25 to 30,000 words for £25 a time, so please do not send me any more sneers at my art. Sorry, Art.

Many things that would preoccupy O'Brien throughout his life are evident in that letter: his desire for literary acceptance, his quest for financial success, his difficult relationship with James Joyce, and of course his strange obsession with Sexton Blake. O'Brien's choice of Ethel Mannin as a possible champion of his work is certainly a strange one: her forté was mostly sentimental popular fiction with a left-leaning feminist tinge, very far from what *AS2B* could be seen as being, and her liberal views—she had affairs with both WB Yeats and Bertrand Russell—hardly coincided with O'Brien's own highly conservative Catholic worldview, or his apparent misogyny.

O'Brien next mentions Sexton Blake over fifteen years later, in 1955, when he writes to the Stephen Aske literary agency in London, suggesting that he would write Blake stories for them to place on his behalf. This letter is on file at the Flann O'Brien Archive at the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University:

This letter arises from a chat I had the other day with my friend Marten Cumberland, who gave me leave to quote his name. He told me of the market for Sexton Blake stories and suggested I get in touch with you. I am interested in trying my hand at this sort of work.

[...] I regard myself as an accomplished literary handyman.

I have read the Sexton Blake stories in my day and can, of course, refresh my recollection with the current stories. I am sure I could do this job particularly as Cumberland said, he thought the plot would be supplied. Anyhow, I should like to try. I would be willing to supply two chapters as a sample for nothing.

Sadly, Southern Illinois University have no record of a reply to this. [This is also untrue, as it turns out... PÓM]

Flann talks next of Blake in 1962 (in 1961 *AS2B* was republished by London publisher MacGibbon & Kee, soon followed by the frankly inferior *The Hard Life* the following year), in an interview for BBC television's Bookshelf with Peter Duval Smith, which included this exchange:

PDS: I believe I'm right in saying you've written several Sexton Blake detective stories?

FOB: Yes, I have,

PDS: Are you proud of them?

FOB: I am very proud of them, very proud indeed.

PDS: How many did you write?

FOB: I've written five...

He again confirmed that he had written Blake books in the Cruiskeen Lawn column in the *Irish Times*, in a three-part piece starting on 27 February 1964, where he laments the publication of the last book in the Sexton Blake Library:



It is sad to find how a friend, intending to be kind, can bring down gloom and sorrow. A few weeks ago one of my Ladies of the Bedchamber at Santry (a purely honorary office) called to a newsagent to collect my usual compendium of reading matter, and in due time delivered to me *Lady's Home Journal*, *Osservatore Romano*, *Our Boys*, *Which?*, *'Fanny Hill'*, *Studies*, *Die Zeit*, *News of the World*, and—*The Last Tiger*, a Sexton Blake story by Wm. A. Ballinger.

It was that last item which shocked me deeply because (a) the book announced itself to be the last of Sexton Blake series, the great detective having just retired, and (b) because I have myself belonged to the arch, arcane, and areopagitic coterie of authors who have written Sexton Blake stories for Fleetway Publications Ltd, London.

Oh, do not laugh, reader. I am very proud of that achievement, and it is barely possible that the Editor might get permission to reproduce my story serially in these columns.

Those four mentions of his writing Sexton Blake stories—in 1939, 1955, 1962, and 1964 - are the only ones I can find—which is not to say there aren't others yet to come to light—but in themselves they certainly show that, over that twenty-five-year span, and possibly before it, Flann O'Brien was both interested in Sexton Blake, and either had written stories for the series or, for whatever reason, kept up the pretence that he had written them for at least a quarter of a century. Why was Flann O'Brien so obsessed with the idea of writing Sexton Blake stories, which ones might he have written, and, finally, did he actually do so?

To understand the *why* of this conundrum, this Mylesean pancake, we need to know something of his circumstances. O'Brien is often lumped in with James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, the trinity of truly modern Irish literature, but he really wasn't like them, in many ways. Joyce and Beckett were Dubliners, born in the affluent suburbs of Rathgar and Foxrock, respectively, but Flann was an outsider, being from Strabane, in the divided six counties of Northern Ireland. Whilst Flann longed to be a Dubliner, the other two turned their backs on their native city—and country—instead settling in mainland Europe. Any chance he might have had to migrate, to become a true European ex-pat, was destroyed by World War II, his failure to find a publisher for his second book, and his role as the family's sole earner after his father's death in 1937. He was trapped to the life of a civil servant, tethered to his own perception of himself as a failed novelist. One other thing, both cause and effect, feeding ever back on itself, was his voracious alcoholism, which took hold of him early, and undoubtedly contributed hugely to his too-early death at the age of 54, just when it seemed he might actually be making some sort of a comeback as a 'proper' writer. As a result of several of these things, O'Brien was always looking for more ways to make money, and the Sexton Blake stories seemed perfectly suited for this. They were hugely popular, and the rights were owned by the publisher, rather than the original writer, meaning that there was a huge potential market there, if he could but get his foot in the door. It also seems likely that he had read the stories in his youth. If he based various names he used on Griffin's *The Collegians*, then it is also possible that he chose the name of Sergeant Pluck, the man who first utters the line 'Is it about a bicycle?', from the old Penny Dreadful title *Pluck*. And his very fascination with *The Collegians* does seem to show an interest in crime fiction, as does the fact that there was a volume of Sherlock Holmes

short stories amongst the books in his library, as preserved in Boston College's John J Burns Library.

But there might have been an even more fundamental reason that Flann wanted to write crime fiction, besides the need for money and the seemingly easy Sexton Blake market he was so taken with. When O'Brien's father died they found amongst his papers a crime novel he had written, and which had been accepted by publishers Collins, but which never saw print, as the elder Nolan was unhappy about their payment terms. The desire to write crime novels didn't stop there, either, as Flann's brother Ciarán had two books published by An Gúm, featuring amateur detective Parthalán Mac Mórna. Flann's own crime novel, *The Third Policeman*, had failed to be accepted in the gap between the publication of his brother's two books, and this may have added a certain spur to his desire to produce *something* in that genre.

As soon as that interview with Peter Duval Smith on BBC TV went out on April 1962, people began to speculate about which titles he might have written. The June 1962 issue of *Collectors' Digest*—a magazine devoted to British story papers—had an article referring to the interview, and asking 'Detective Inspector Lofts,' if he could find out. DI Lofts—an entirely imaginary and honorary rank—was actually William Oliver Guillemont Lofts, a tireless cataloguer of boys' papers and related matters, and in his time probably the greatest living expert on Sexton Blake's labyrinthine maze of writers, pseudonyms, and house names and, at the time of that article, had been the SBL's editor since November 1956. If anyone was likely to know the answer, it was him. He replied to the request:

I can only offer the following suggestions:

1: He did write Blake stories – but they were all rewritten by a regular writer.

2: He was the man who wrote stories by 'Stephen Blakesley'—in the current series, the name of the author being given as F. Bond—but of whom no details are known.

3: He certainly has never written any Blake stories under the editorship of W. Howard Baker, for Mr. Baker knows all his authors personally.

4: Being a true Irishman it is possible that the mention of writing Blakes is real Blarney!

Finally, there was a name. Stephen Blakesley. Who was he, and what had he written? It turns out that there are eight books by Blakesley, from three different British 'pulp' publishers: Bear, Hudson published *Terrell in Trouble* in 1946, Piccadilly Novels published four titles, two each in 1946 and 1947—*The Proctor Case*, *A Case for the Cardinal*, *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, and *The Case of the Alpha Murders*, and the three remaining titles were published as part of Amalgamated Press's Sexton Blake Library, one in 1951, and the other two in 1952: *The Riddle of the Blazing Bungalow*, *The Trail of Raider No. 1*, and *The Man with a Number*. Was Stephen Blakesley yet another pseudonym of Flann O'Brien? And, if so, why was Bill Lofts giving the authors name as F Bond? In an article called 'De

Me,' published in Queens University, Belfast's *New Ireland* in March 1964, he had quite a bit to say about the use of pseudonyms by writers:

In twenty-five years I have written 10 books (that is, substantial *opera*) under four quite irreconcilable pen-names and on subjects absolutely unrelated. Five of those books could be described as works of imagination, one of world social comment, two on scientific subjects, one of literary conjecture exploration and conjecture, one in Irish and one a play (which was produced by the Abbey Theatre). On top of that I have produced an enormous mass of miscellaneous material consisting of short stories, scripts for radio and TV, contributions to newspapers and magazines, and even book reviews.

This is work and can be very rewarding financially, often surprisingly so. But is it insufferably hard work? Not necessarily.

He repeated the assertion that a writer should have one pen-name hidden inside another in his reply to Bill Lofts:

So far as Sexton Blake is concerned, I cannot help you very much, as it is such a long time ago. I should point out that in innumerable writings on a great diversity of planes, and subjects, I have never once used my own name. I have countless pseudonyms, and for reasons of my own it is sometimes necessary for me to mislead publishers.

We can at least say that neither Stephen Blakesley nor F Bond are necessarily impediments to these books being by Flann.

Nor would he have been the only writer to disguise himself in this way, either—when Cathal Ó Sándair's *Bullets are Trumps* was published by the SBL in 1961, he submitted it under the name of A Cahill, although it was published under the house name of Desmond Reid. Some sources suggest that Flann and Cathal were drinking companions, and that the latter got both the idea about submitting under a false cover name and the idea of writing a Sexton Blake story from the former, but there's nothing to back this up, and plenty of evidence, including that of Ó Sándair's own offspring, to suggest they weren't ever acquainted. Although both of them wrote for Ciarán Ó Nualláin's Irish language newspaper, *Inniu*, so who can tell?

Can any of those names yield any further clues, though? Flann was occasionally given to leaving little hints embedded in his pseudonyms, as we saw with his use of names from Griffin's *The Collegians*. The Irish for Dublin is Baile Átha Cliath, (pronounced Blaw-KLEE-ah), very similar to Blakeley, so not a million miles from Blakesley. Is that a hint in there, for those who wish to see it? There has to be something in the similarity between that surname and that of Sexton Blake himself, surely. And his other name here—F. Bond. Could it be possible that the middle three letters, BON, stand for Brian Ó Núalláin? Probably not, but you just never know, do you?

If you are conducting a criminal enquiry, at least the ones you read about in books, you look for Means, Motive, and Opportunity. And you look for evidence, which will allow you to tie all these together. Flann O'Brien certainly has plenty of motive to want to write, and to write Sexton Blake stories in particular. He had the means, as he was an accomplished writer, by any measure you care to use. Did he, though, have the opportunity? Did the editors at the SBL ever accept or publish any of his work? At the

outset, there seems to be plenty of evidence to suggest that he did. There are huge amount of references to his having written Sexton Blake books, sometimes even including the possibility of them being under the name of Blakesley, in books and articles, and online blogs. (I'm responsible for one of the latter myself, before I had properly got to grips with my subject—very much an ongoing project, as my occasional interjections into this slightly repurposed essay show....)

Nonetheless, nobody seemed really sure. There were, after all, a few snags, the most serious of which is the timeframe of it all. If, as he told Ethel Mannin in 1939, he was negotiating with the SBL to write books, why was he writing to ask Stephen Aske to place stories for him in 1955? If he didn't start writing the stories before 1955, then what about all the books published under the name of Stephen Blakesley between 1946 and 1952? It did seem as if the mystery would remain unresolved, without even a satisfactory explanation as to why the story was so prevalent, yet so untested. After all, the National Library in Dublin have three SBL Blakesley titles listed, and attributed to Flann O'Brien, in their catalogue.

Writing in *The Spectator* in January 1988, in an article called The Mysteries of Flann O'Brien, John Wyse Jackson, having reviewed all the evidence he had to date, finished by saying,

Thus far, therefore, the story of the mysteries of Flann O'Brien. Perhaps O'Nolan wrote them, or perhaps he wrote other, earlier ones. [...] Pity the poor bibliographer. All helpful correspondence will be gratefully received.

Although Flann's own claims sometimes don't seem to ring true, he nonetheless maintained his position that he had written Sexton Blake stories right the way through his life. It was a situation that his fellow Dublin resident Erwin Schrödinger would have recognised—both solutions were potentially true, and we could only know which by metaphorically opening the box. At this point, we were unlikely to find any new information...

Until, that is, a man called Jack Adrian, more correctly a British writer born Christopher Lowder, wrote a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in November 1989:

Sir, The problem of whether or not Brian O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien) wrote Sexton Blake stories—mentioned by Denis Donoghue in his review of Anthony Cronin's biography of O'Brien, *No Laughing Matter* (October 27—November 2)—has bedevilled researchers for nearly thirty years. I think it's possible he did. What I'm sure he didn't do is write them, or anything, under the name 'Stephen Blakesley'—although I fear the canard that he did may well, in the first place, have emanated from me.

[...]

In 1962 a colleague of mine, Bill Lofts, wrote to O'Nolan, who proved evasive on exactly which Blake novels (out of fifteen hundred) he'd written, when, and under what pseudonym; follow up letters were ignored. All of the Blake authors had by then been identified, their



pseudonyms penetrated—except for one writer: Stephen Blakesley, who wrote a handful in the period 1951-3 (*The Riddle of the Blazing Bungalow*, *The Trail of Rider No 1*, etc). No trace of him has ever been found, no Blake writer remembered ever seeing him and, in any case, payments for the books themselves were discovered to have been made to an ‘F. Bond,’ which might have been the real name of the author, or an agent or—as it was then (1962) suspected—a cover for Brian O’Nolan.

In the late 1970s I discovered that cheap paperback originals (non-Blake) by ‘Blakesley’ had also been published in the period 1945-7 (*Terrell in Trouble*, *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, etc). I mentioned the Flann O’Brien / ‘Stephen Blakesley’ theory to a friend, who then passed on the good news to a runner for a number of London Modern-Firsts dealers. Within a couple of months no Blakesleys were to be found anywhere, unless you had a tenner or more to spare—and this at a time when the average early-1950s Sexton Blake usually sold for 25p.

The snag is, the Blakesley books simply don’t read like Brian O’Nolan. That is to say, they don’t read like a witty and clever writer hiding his true style under a veneer of junk, or even a man verging on alcoholism (as O’Nolan was at that time) banging out the first thing that came into his head, for money. There are no little touches, no penetrable (to those in the know) jokes. They are distinctly run-of-the-mill. Significantly, the main characters in most of the Blakesley thrillers (Blake or nonBlake) have a habit of settling their differences in a particular area of Britain—the industrial Midlands, where I suspect ‘Stephen Blakesley,’ whoever he was, came from originally. In any case, ‘Blakesley’ only wrote three Sexton Blakes, not five.

I’m not sure if the quibbles about the quantities of SBL books Flann claims to have written are important, but two sentences immediately jumped out at me: ‘I mentioned the Flann O’Brien / ‘Stephen Blakesley’ theory to a friend, who then passed on the good news to a runner for a number of London Modern-Firsts dealers...’ As far as I’m concerned, there’s only one person who fits this description: it had to be Driffield from *The Cardinal and the Corpse*. Was the entire thing, from beginning to end, a scam by a canny bookseller, to sell largely worthless books for vastly inflated prices, based on some very dubious circumstantial evidence?

Did *anyone* know the truth?

One day, not too long ago, I spotted Micheál Ó Nualláin, the only surviving member of the twelve Nolan siblings, and 86 years old himself, at a bus stop, waiting for a bus out to Monkstown. I should go and ask him, I thought. But did I want to? Did I want to actually solve this, to know for sure if it was true or untrue? I’d already done ridiculous amount of digging, involving visits to both the National Library here in Dublin and the British Museum in London, much correspondence with lots of kind and helpful people, and spent far too much money buying books that ultimately expanded, rather than contracted, the mysteries here. I thought about it, and watched his bus arrive, watched him get on it, and wondered if I’d made the right decision, not approaching. And I decided that I definitely should have asked him, because I might never get another chance.

Fortunately, I got another chance. A while after that first existential encounter, I saw him again at the bus stop. This time, reader, I asked him. ‘I don’t think so,’ said Micheál, ‘but you wouldn’t know. It’s the kind of thing he’d do, though.’

## Some Notes:

**Marten Cumberland** was an Englishman who eventually settled in Ireland, and author of about fifty novels, mostly crime, featuring at least two recurring characters - French police inspector Saturnin Dax under his own name, and Argentinian private investigator Chico Brett under the name of Kevin O'Hara. Unlike many of the writers mentioned here, who seem to have had short lives and violent ends, he died in Dublin at the grand old age of eighty, presumably in his own bed. He was, in his time, on the books of the Stephen Aske literary agency, and probably a much better choice of literary referee than Ethel Mannin, all in all.

***The Last Tiger*** by WA Ballinger—in this case a pseudonym for W. Howard Baker—writing a story suggested by Wilfred McNeilly and George Paul Mann (so one and a bit Irishmen), was published by Fleetway Publications in June 1963, and reflects the name of the very first book published by the SBL in 1915, *The Yellow Tiger*, written by George Hamilton Teed, a Canadian, who spent a bit of time in Dublin as a soldier, but managed to avoid that little fracas in which Lord Dunsany got injured.

To the very end, Flann never got over his animosity towards **James Joyce**. In his last book, *The Dalkey Archive*, he has Joyce wishing to join the Jesuits, and claiming that he never wrote any of the books that were attributed to him, which echoes Gerard Griffin's later life in all sorts of interesting ways. In the end, he has Joyce being offered the job of washing and mending the priests' rotting undergarments, rather than an actual position in the order. When writing to Cecil Scott of publishers Macmillan in New York in January 1964 he says 'The intention here is not to make Joyce himself ridiculous but to say something funny about the preposterous image of him that emerges from the treatment he has received at the hands of many commentators and exegetists (mostly, alas, American).' However, when writing to Timothy O'Keefe in September 1962, when he's still writing the book, he confided 'But Joyce. I've had it I for that bugger for a long time and I think this is the time.'

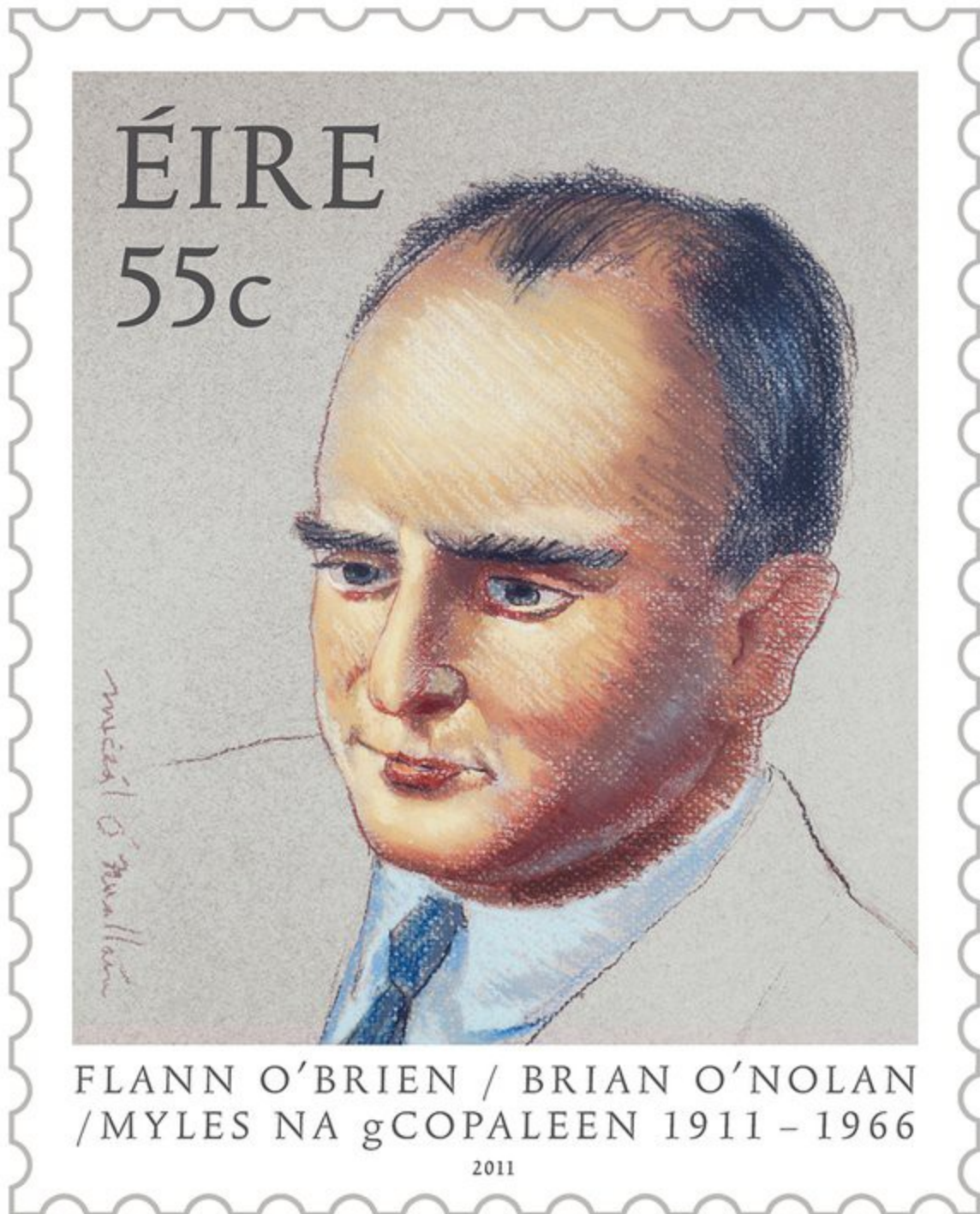
We know that Joyce read ***Pluck***, as it is mentioned right at the beginning of one of the stories from *Dubliners*, *An Encounter*: 'It was Joe Dillon who introduced the Wild West to us. He had a little library made up of old numbers of *The Union Jack*, *Pluck* and *The Halfpenny Marvel*.'

**Erwin Schrödinger** was one of a huge amount of people and institutions that Myles took to task at one point or another in his Cruiskeen Lawn column. Another was the Irish Post Office, which may explain why, when they issued a commemorative stamp and first day cover to mark the centenary of his birth in 2011, they did so one day out—on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, instead of the 5<sup>th</sup>. Institutional incompetence, or revenge served cold?

**Micheál Ó Nualláin** died in July 2016, at the age of 88, having collapsed at the same bus stop where I used to meet him. He was some man for one man, as was his brother before him.

## Miscellanea

On October 5th, 2011, the centenary of Brian O’Nolan’s birth, the Irish post office issued a commemorative stamp featuring a portrait of the writer by his brother Micheál Ó Nualláin...



The following year, Google marked what would have been O’Nolan’s 101st birthday by giving him his own Google Doodle...





# Selected Bibliography

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