Myles of Writing: Brian O'Nolan's Newspaper Columns

Donald McNamara
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

The Irish columnist Brian O'Nolan, a.k.a. Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen, used a deceptively humorous touch to give the Irish people an accurate look at themselves.

Despite the pastoral images given by movies such as John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, Ireland throughout the twentieth century was a place of varied, sometimes conflicting, identities. Having secured de facto independence in 1922 and official independence in 1949, Ireland wrestled with problems of identity in a variety of ways. It tried to reconcile its agrarian values with the fact that many decisions were made in urban settings. It struggled to establish a post-colonial "Irish" identity while in fact retaining British cultural values and norms. Despite the Irish reputation for lightheartedness, there was a deadly earnestness on the part of the new republic's founding fathers that permeated Irish society. An ascendant, and triumphalist, Roman Catholic Church oversaw an ethos that gave precedence to a Catholic agenda while maintaining token acceptance of the fading Protestant Ascendancy. (*The Quiet Man* did reflect this last part.)

The Republic of Ireland was so entranced with its own purity—sexual, ethnic, and cultural—that it isolated itself from the rest of the world, maintaining an attitude of saintliness that allowed it to cast a sanctimonious eye on a world degenerating into sexual license, while at the same time promoting an idea of Irishness that meant Gaelic lineage as well as Catholicism, and maintaining an agrarian identity (imposed by city dwellers) while the rest of the western world was busy industrializing. This might seem consonant with the criticism by William Butler Yeats of those who "fumble in a greasy till" in

his poem "September 1913,"[1] but the leaders of the new Ireland had little in common with Yeats.

An ardent nationalism took many forms, including ostentatious rejection of anything (even sports) that smacked of Britishness, official (if not genuine) embracing of the Irish language,[2] and a resurrection of ancient myths as the basis for a new national consciousness.

While there was a multitude of voices perpetuating a national cacophony, one voice tried to help the Irish really be a people by finding the humor in everyday life; tried to help them see what was funny and what was not; tried to help them gain a real appreciation of how a nation-state can take its place among the nations of the world, not as a military power, but as a mature entity, a grown-up among grown-ups, fully worthy of a seat in the drawing room of modern society, but capable of relaxing and enjoying a truly funny joke.

The voice was that of Brian O'Nolan,[3] a man who would take on a variety of personae, including the pen names of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen. Most important for our purpose here he was a newspaper columnist. But he was also a novelist, gadfly, drinking companion to many of Ireland's other literati, and possibly a victim of his own success. Even though his novels are experiencing a resurgence in interest among the literati, it was his columns—for better or worse—that captured the "first draft" of Ireland's national—and cultural—aspirations, often with a profoundly wicked sense of humor for revealing the soft cultural underbelly. That is my focus here.

Brian O'Nolan was born in County Tyrone in 1911 into a bilingual (Irish and English) family; his father was a civil servant. As a boy, Brian did not receive formal education until he was twelve, partly because the father's job caused several relocations. In 1929 O'Nolan entered University College, Dublin, and Ireland's capital city would be the base of operations for O'Nolan for the rest of his life. His college career started two years after the Fianna Fáil party, led by icon Eamon de Valera, ended its boycott of participation in government, and well after James Joyce had moved to the Continent.

O'Nolan was thus part of a generation of writers who came of age after the political struggles with England had subsided and for whom political separation was not an overarching concern, although memory of the struggle was still fresh in the minds of many people. Because of O'Nolan's family background, the historical setting, and the fact that he was one of the few Irish artists who did not move to England or North America for any length of time, his column writing would display a thoroughgoing Irish feeling, and in particular a Dublin feeling, while exhibiting a cosmopolitan ethos.

Those unfamiliar with Irish history may not recognize them, but O'Nolan uses many historical or cultural references. In 1929 the Irish government

passed a very Catholic-driven Censorship of Publications Act that banned literature that could be viewed as obscene or that promoted contraception.[4] O'Nolan also used Brother Barnabas to parody the Celtic Twilight movement, the effort by Yeats and Lady Gregory et al. a quarter-century earlier to mine Irish myth for contemporary drama. Actually, he was parodying those people who drew bogus inspiration from the myths and folklore more than he was mocking Yeats and Lady Gregory. Anthony Cronin maintains that O'Nolan was indifferent to Yeats.[5] O'Nolan accomplished this by talking about Brother Barnabas's ancestry in terms of hazy, exotic origins. His forebears were Russian (half-caste Jewish) but not Russian bears; they came from a place where democracy, ladies, a square deal for the working man, universal literacy, and other anomalies were unknown. The biggest threat to the regime was from the hedge schools (another reference to Irish lore—hedge schools brought education to many Irish children when it was still forbidden by British law; they were so named because classes had to be held behind hedges or in other places of concealment). Brother Barnabas comes to Dublin and joins the Gaelic League, changing his name to the Irish version, *An Bráthair Barnabas*. He practices his Irish-language lessons on tram tops in Donnybrook on a wet Thursday in order to "bridge the disparity between a shoddy foreign machined suiting [foreign goods mass produced rather than handmade in Ireland] and a Gaelic Ireland, free and united." He goes on to compare Caitlín Ní h-Uallacháin (a female identity used by poets to signify Ireland) to the female figures of Britannia and the sowing girl of Gaul, even if Caitlín had to resort to homely homespun corsets to mold her figure and had to change her name or resort to aliases such as Róisín Dubh (Dark [haired] Roseen) and Niamh Chinn Oir (Neev of the Golden Head [hair]).

In 1934, O'Nolan, along with several friends, started a monthly publication, *Blather*, billed as "The only paper exclusively devoted to the interests of clay-pigeon shooting in Ireland." In the inaugural issue (it lasted five months), the editor states brazenly that *Blather* has no principles of honor or shame.

> Our objects are the fostering of graft and corruption in public life, the furtherance of cant and hypocrisy, the encouragement of humbug and hysteria, the glorification of greed and gombeenism.[6]

Once again, despite the apparent badinage, there is a serious purpose at work in the passage, but one requiring explanation, including the distinctly Irish "gombeenism": What O'Brien is doing is utilizing inversion to show that the very evils *Blather* would supposedly further are those that O'Nolan sees as pervasive in contemporary Irish life, damaging the rebuilding nation; they

were the ones that he would like most to expose and, more important, eradicate. The only clay pigeons that would be shot in *Blather* were those of cant, hypocrisy, humbug, hysteria, greed, and finally gombeenism, which refers to a particular form of usury in Ireland.[7] In trying to help the country realize the society that it could be, rather than one preached by patriots and antiquarians, O'Nolan enthusiastically utilized such satirical techniques as inversion and magnification, raising nonsense to ridiculous, and ridiculously heroic, heights.

In addition to his blatant attempts at demystification, O'Nolan resorted to subtle references to slogans and symbols that had become enshrined in the Irish national consciousness and are reflected in the following examples: "motley" (a reference to Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916" in which the poet suggested that before the Rising the leaders were simply fools); "an empty formula" (a reference to de Valera's dealing with the problem of an oath of allegiance to the British crown in order to join the government); "No man can set bounds to the onward march of a great paper" (a reference to Charles Stewart Parnell, the "uncrowned king" of Ireland who brought Ireland to the brink of self-government); a question of "tillage or ranching" (a reference to an issue that bedeviled landlords and tenants in Ireland in the nineteenth century); and Blazes O'Blather (a reference to a character from Joyce's *Ulysses* but with a different surname, indicating what Blazes will offer), who takes over from Brother Barnabas as Ireland's sage and would-be savior. O'Nolan utilizes magnification, referred to as gigantism in such works as Joyce's "Cyclops" episode in *Ulysses*, which is the national tendency in Ireland to magnify indigenous things beyond the bounds of reality.[8]

In 1935 O'Nolan took a civil service job in the department of local government, and his journalistic work took a hiatus. In 1939, Longmans Green & Co. in London published O'Nolan's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, written under the pen name of Flann O'Brien, which includes O'Nolan's own chaotic rendering of Irish myth and folklore, among other things. The book was a commercial failure, possibly because World War II prevented marketing it, and another novel, *The Third Policeman*, written a year later, was not able to find a publisher. Today, those two are must-reads among scholars of O'Nolan and indeed of Irish literature.

In 1940, after he wrote a series of letters to the *Irish Times* under a variety of names in which he criticized not only the newspaper but his own criticisms of it, O'Nolan was invited to write a regular column, and it was then that he started to become nationally renowned. The invitation came from R. M. Smyllie, the editor of the *Irish Times*, who was trying to broaden the base of a publication that heretofore was confined primarily to an Anglo-Irish reader-

ship. The name of the column was "Cruiskeen Lawn," from the Irish *Cruiscín Lán*, meaning "Full Jug" or "Little Brimming Jug." The columnist was identified as Myles na gCopaleen, in accordance with Irish-language grammar and spelling conventions, but eventually O'Nolan changed it to Myles na Gopaleen, a phonetic rendering of the original version. Even here O'Nolan is playing around, mixing Irish spelling (the gC, for example) with phonetic English spelling (the -een endings and Lawn, for example).

The name Myles na gCopaleen was taken from that of a comic stage-Irish character (usually a liar, thief, and moonshine distiller) in the plays of Dion Boucicault, and was a character that originated in Gerald Griffin's novel, *The Collegians*. Myles na gCopalín can be translated from Irish to mean "Myles of the Little Horses," although O'Brien delighted in quibbling over the meaning, saying that it meant "Myles of the Ponies" and arguing that the autonomy of the pony must not be subjugated to the imperialism of the horse,[9] another satirical dig by O'Brien at Ireland's self-conscious attempts to emerge from England's shadow.

The column was to appear three times a week, but O'Nolan would sometimes write more frequently and, later, sometimes less frequently. C*ruiskeen Lawn* first appeared in the Irish language, or mixtures of Irish and English, although within a few years it was written exclusively in English. Myles expounded on many subjects, and one treatment, or mistreatment, was seldom enough for any subject. Over the years, O'Nolan would return to topics he had written about earlier, always alert for new possibilities. The title of the column, which implies that it will deal with many subjects, came from a seventeenth-century folk song that praises drinking and therefore promises a sense of intoxicated variety. *Cruiskeen Lawn* dealt with many of the same topics treated in *Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather*, but, as with both of those, an apparently humorous treatment was in fact a brilliant satire, containing an earnest look at many of Ireland's problems. As time went on, Myles even dealt with international issues, but always there was the satirist's treatment.

Cruiskeen Lawn introduced a host of characters, and, as with his earlier efforts, all of the personae are inventions of O'Brien's. One such character is The Brother, a know-it-all and busybody who has a ready (and specious) answer for each of Ireland's problems. He knows how to surround his subject with mystery and obfuscation, which gives his words an illusion of gravity. For example, when The Brother's landlady is sick, The Brother, who has no use for doctors, takes charge of the situation—"took command as quick as you'd order a pint"—and observes every propriety because he is "a very strict man for doing things the right way, you know, although he's not a married man himself"[10] (a thinly veiled gibe at Ireland's sexual mores being dictated

by celibate priests, and being adhered to so slavishly by the faithful). The Brother can never leave Dublin during The Emergency (World War II) because the government may call him in for consultation, and he is versed in such arcana as the fact that the French never get to eat breakfast because they are too absorbed in art.

O'Brien's readers laughed at The Brother, but the character is much more than simply a comic invention; O'Brien sees him as typical of much that plagues Ireland. As John Ryan, a contemporary and friend of O'Brien, noted:

> This "Brother" is the archetypal Liffeysider. He is Dublin absolute and of the nadir. Like any true city-slicker, he is a know-all. Naturally he is also a hob-lawyer, pub-philosopher and letter-to-the-editor writer on all civic matters. He is very quick with the repartee. Essentially humourless, he is the catalyst for an unending sequence of comic implosions that are centred upon his person. His many alarming encounters with the English language leave the latter bloody and, if not unbowed, less game for the next bout . . . Myles rounds off the man, gives him flesh and bones, in short presents him in three dimensions and immortalizes him.[11]

This character who is presented in three dimensions and immortalized is the archetypal hero of the new, refashioned Ireland in which O'Nolan found himself, much to his dismay. He displays the narrow-mindedness and backbiting associated with small towns in the economic, cultural, and political capital of the Republic of Ireland. When compared to mythic heroes Cúchulainn or Fionn Mac Cumhail, whose deeds were mighty and whose legends continue, The Brother looks quite pale. He is in fact capable of no great feats of any kind; his importance is in his own mind only. The Brother never makes an appearance; his exploits are related by the narrator to an unfortunate listener at the bus stop, in a reversal of the Irish story-telling tradition by which listeners eagerly sit around a fire while a storyteller regales them with tales of heroes from times past. The inescapable suspicion is that the speaker is actually The Brother, adding weight to his story by putting it in the third person; therefore, in addition to the inversion of the heroic tradition, Myles offers a modern rendering of its comic possibilities. When heroes such as Cúchulainn prepared for battle, they recited their accomplishments from previous encounters, both to frighten their enemies and encourage themselves. The Brother merely becomes more of a blowhard as he continues to talk, regaling listeners with his bottomless well of erroneous information. Further, if Cúchulainn would have boasted of his exploits just before battle, he never would have told stories about himself once the events were over; those tales were related by awe-struck observers. The only personage awe-struck by The Brother's feats is himself, and his feats hardly rank on the level of Cúchulainn

defending Ulster from the Connachtmen. Reflecting modern Ireland's pedestrianism, The Brother functions as a satiric shadow not only of the heroic tradition but also of the bardic tradition that required the *seanchaí*—which is a traditional Irish storyteller and historian[12]—to speak to listeners of heroic deeds worth remembering. The only thing worth remembering about The Brother is his inexhaustible doltishness. The Brother's information is nothing more than idle chatter or gossip, and yet O'Brien is showing that such useless talk, which purports to free the listener from quotidian concerns, only achieves the opposite effect and, in so doing, closes off the outside world, the world of creativity. In this, then, The Brother resembles Ireland, shutting out real intelligence in favor of gossip and self-glorification.

In addition to Myles, there is his father, Sir Myles na gCopaleen (the da), who celebrated his eighty-seventh birthday with congratulations from some of the notorious uncrowned heads[13] of Europe in what is another reference to Parnell. Sir Myles is reckoned to be the fifty-seventh of the oldest baronetcy in the country, and his wife Lady na gCopaleen comes from a very distinguished family, the Shaughrans of Limerick. The name of Lady na gCopaleen's family comes from a play by Boucicault, *The Shaughran*, meaning "The Wanderer" from the Irish word *seachranaí*.[14] Just as the pseudo-mists-of-time ancestry in the earlier incarnation of Myles parodies nostalgia for an era that never was, which is one risk of the Celtic Twilight, this latest claim of heraldry lampoons the modern Irish who claim royal ancestry no matter how humble their circumstances. It is yet one more reminder from O'Brien, ostensibly humorous on the surface but deadly serious underneath, which the refashioned Ireland needed to shake itself free of tenuous, and spurious, claims to ancient glory and look toward shaping its future glory.

After Sir Myles died, his body was exhumed following a dispute over a clause in his will stipulating the bequest of an art collection to the National Gallery. This passage satirizes the controversy surrounding the Municipal Gallery's rejection of a donation by Lady Gregory's nephew Hugh Lane, who was Anglo-Irish, because some people expressed doubt about his motives; Yeats wrote several poems excoriating those who would reject the offer and disparage Lane's motivation and sincerity.[15] The na gCopaleen dispute was settled, more or less, when the exhumation revealed that Sir Myles was still alive, thus giving us mock heroic immortality (Christian as well as Irish); he returned to civil life but not without several situations that are awkward to say the least: believing herself to be a widow, Lady na gCopaleen remarried, hastily, we might add, and to wastrel cousin Sir Hosis na gCopaleen, whose brandy bills were so high that the good lady applied to the court for an annulment of the marriage. As if all that is not messy enough, Sir Myles ap-

plied for a declaration that he is immune from the jurisdiction of the court, having died.[16] Thus, societal propriety is raised to a mythic/heroic, and thus ludicrous, level.

The anthology was published at a time of change in development of *Cruiskeen Lawn* but still during the time of the Censorship Act, which put a crimp on book publishing and thus allowed newspapers to become very influential in affecting public opinion. By this time, O'Brien had come to realize that, because newspapers were readily available, there was an immediate contact between columnist and reader that helped charge his comments on the situation of Ireland, as he intermingled journalistic style with his own imagination.[17] O'Brien found a means of expression that makes use of the two conflicting approaches, serious journalism and utterly free-form creativity, and he made it not merely a mixture of styles but his own style, in a way that drew fully on the artistic potential of both.

One series in the anthology had Myles describing his efforts as a playwright. Not only do his plays cause riots (so that Myles raises himself to the quasi-mythical status of John M. Synge) but they are lousy plays, Myles proclaims, almost proudly. This is Ireland, however, so Myles can revel in his own failure as an assurance of his own greatness. In this voice, Myles does more than speak for Ireland: Myles becomes Ireland.

In one column, Myles mentioned that he had been invited to become a member of WAAMA, the Irish Writers, Actors, Artists, Musicians Association and a real life organization in Ireland, and that he has bought a few minor novelists "at five bob a skull" to nominate him for presidency of the organization. He has prepared a few humble words of acceptance, but to his shock he sees the "wretched intellectuals" break up into groups from which he can hear such phrases as "never sober," "literary corner-boy" and much worse. His nomination dies before it gains any momentum.[18] This apparently self-depreciating passage is another that carries deeper meaning, as O'Nolan takes the model story of the discovery of the hero and turns it on its head. Instead of such mythic Irish heroes as Cúchulainn or Fionn, who proved their worth with their prowess in battle and were easily recognized as heroes, O'Nolan/Myles presents a would-be hero who must resort to bribery just to get his name offered for election, and then watches helplessly as his nomination is unceremoniously rejected, listening to the disparaging remarks others make about him. Victorians saw heroes such as Cúchulainn and Fionn rising to the occasion when their talents were needed in times of turmoil. Myles was fully prepared to take his heroic position, just as Ireland's literary/artistic movement needed a leader, only to be rebuffed by the very people who should have recognized him as their savior. By poking fun at himself, O'Nolan satirizes

and deflates the entire structure of belief that in times of crisis a hero would inevitably arise to restore order—and that every barstool philosopher with an idea could pose as a leader—while at the same time (and more important in terms of his satire) he strikes at the belief that the emerging Irish national and literary identity could be articulated in one monolithic voice.

This passage also carries several autobiographical elements. When O'Nolan was at UCD, he campaigned for election as Auditor of the Literary and Historical Society and lost to Vivion de Valera, Eamon's son. The younger de Valera's victory can be attributed to his name as well as to the fact that what little political writing O'Nolan did was either humorous or ironic, not the kind of treatment that would receive a warm reception in a country laboring to take itself seriously as an independent nation, Gaelic and free.[19]

Myles wrote in a later column that the presidency of WAAMA went to Irish author Seán O'Faolain, an act that caused Myles to speculate that Diarmuid MacMurrough may not have been the worst miscreant in Irish history, another mixing of the legendary and, in O'Nolan's case, the autobiographical, as we will see shortly. Important here is that Myles compares a historical figure, Diarmuid MacMurrough, who is reviled to this day for asking the English king to intervene in an Irish matter, thus inviting the English serpent into the Irish bosom, to his own situation of losing out on the leadership of an esoteric arts organization. Myles is so angered by the choice of president that he engineers a "split" and forms his own rival group, issuing a call for adherents. Thus, Myles renders his own version of the kind of rivalry that carries an aura of glory and nobility in mythology but that in reality—such as the split over Parnell's involvement in a divorce, the partition of Ireland, or the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty disagreement that caused the Irish Civil War—only looks petty and sordid: sour grapes as mythological trope, a trope that defined Ireland as O'Nolan saw it.

The autobiographical element comes into play because O'Nolan really did harbor a personal dislike of O'Faolain, who founded WAAMA. Although O'Faolain, as founding editor of the monthly journal *The Bell*, had as his expressed purpose the provoking of intelligent debate about the social conditions (including the state of literature) in contemporary Ireland, O'Nolan considered O'Faolain to be doing just the opposite—obscuring free thought and encouraging the insularity O'Faolain had pledged to destroy by placing a great deal of emphasis on Irish tradition as the basis of criticism. Steven Curran writes that *The Bell* demonstrated what O'Nolan saw as O'Faolain's flawed critical practices, and Curran cites a letter from O'Nolan to a friend in which he writes that when it came to the subject of art O'Faolain was "the most unspeakable boob possible."[20]

Séamus Deane has observed that in his columns O'Nolan adapted, as everyday conversation, the language and formulae of the Irish civil service, thereby emphasizing the surrealist element that exists in life, inscribed and embedded by bureaucratic conventions. O'Nolan has thus transformed the questionnaire into a gutter literary form and infuses his work with stock words and phrases such as "class" ("a member of the author class," "choosing his boot, the buttoned class") and "party" ("a party by the name of Bagenal") that dampen the limitless variety of life by reducing all its elements into neatly categorized items. The characters of the columns have the same blend of qualities as these mock-specifications; they are predictable and yet strange, thus making them both familiar and alienated. Everyday speech becomes a mimicry of bureaucratese.[21] O'Nolan therefore combines Irish private life, which, despite all the posturing of cultural revivalists, was unconsciously affected by English culture, and the public—civil service—life, one that was intentionally modeled on English forms, into what is the standard of normal Irish life.

By means of the column then, O'Nolan clearly was offering a view of Ireland in light of its political and cultural capital, Dublin, a capital city that retained a small-town ambience of narrow-mindedness expressed via gossip and rumor. Although characters such as The Brother may be Liffeysiders (urban, specifically Dublin, dwellers), they typify much of what O'Nolan saw as simultaneously afflicting and embodying Ireland as a whole.

With modest international and wider local acclaim, O'Nolan's life should have been good. But in 1953 he lost his civil service job after a change in government brought in new superiors who were less tolerant of the columnist's treatment of the government as well as of O'Nolan's increasingly bad attendance at work. The final straw came when the *Irish Times* published a picture of him to accompany a satirical piece he wrote. This destroyed the polite conceit that *Cruiskeen Lawn* was written by several people and that there was no proof that government employee Brian O'Nolan was one of them.

The loss of income was significant because O'Nolan had provided varying degrees of financial support to his eleven siblings after the premature death of their father. He had married Evelyn McDonnell in 1948, and the couple lived in several different homes in suburban Dublin. (They had no children.)

His columns had been scrutinized for libel, scurrility, and double meanings almost from the beginning; some columns were edited heavily and some were rejected outright. In the 1940s the *Irish Times* was sued for libel when, based on several papers given at the Institute of Advanced Studies (which had been founded by deValera), Myles quipped that the Institute was trying to prove that there were two St. Patricks and no God. The case was settled

out of court, with the Irish Times paying £100.[22] Further, he was paid only for columns that appeared in print. Rejections and arguments increased as columns became more polemical.[23] There was another problem. O'Nolan was a heavy drinker and, regardless of content, over time he became less reliable about delivering columns. In 1960, after an acrimonious period, he left the *Irish Times*.

There is no doubt O'Nolan's troubles were caused or exacerbated by his heavy drinking. Cronin writes that O'Nolan drank so heavily that his day virtually ended at 3 in the afternoon and he was in bed by later afternoon, other than a few exceptions when he was out at night.[24]

After an eleven-month hiatus, O'Nolan returned to the *Irish Times*, reaching an agreement that a newly appointed managing director would be the only editor of the columns. This arrangement worked well, but to many readers the columns had changed. This could be in part because de Valera had resigned as *Taoiseach* (prime minister) in 1959 to become president, a ceremonial position. The new *Taoiseach* was Seán Lemass, who embarked on an ambitious program to industrialize Ireland and lessen its isolationism, so that even though Ireland was still backward in many ways it was taking steps to modernize. Cronin theorizes that the new Ireland had less fundamental appeal to O'Nolan as a source of humor; regardless, Myles appeared angrier, but his columns did not display the same mix of anger and affection that a satirist needs.[25] And he still wasn't making much money from it.

In 1941, soon after *Cruiskeen Lawn* first appeared, O'Nolan wrote a novel in the Irish language, *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*), with Myles na gCopaleen listed as the author. The book was a blistering satire of Irish Revivalists who had no true understanding or appreciation of the Irish language or Irish culture,[26] something O'Nolan treated occasionally in his columns, and it was written so as to be inaccessible to any but the most fluent speakers. It too is regarded today as a masterpiece (at least by those who appreciate the satire), although it failed to bring in much money because O'Nolan didn't write an English-language version and refused to authorize anyone to publish a translation.

In 1960 London publisher MacGibbon and Kee reissued *At Swim-Two-Birds* to modest success. Encouraged by this, O'Nolan wrote two novels published by McGibbon and Kee, *The Hard Life: An Exegesis of Squalor* in 1961 and *The Dalkey Archive* in 1964. Cronin calls *Hard Life* a small masterpiece,[27] and *Dalkey Archive* "a traditional novel, rather flatulently composed" (in which) "the writing was far below the standard its acerbic author had . . . set for himself."[28] *Dalkey Archive* was made into a play by Hugh Leonard, *The Saints Go Cycling In*, and O'Nolan was delighted with both the adaptation

and with its commercial success.[29] O'Nolan had written two plays, *Faustus Kelly* and *The Insect Play*, in 1943. He wrote sporadically for Raidio Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's national television and radio station, in the 1950s. He left a novel, *Slattery's Sago Saga*, unfinished, mostly because his poor health was sapping his energy.

O'Nolan had suffered from much ill health, associated with his drinking, and in 1965 he learned that he had cancer in his sinus/throat area. He spent much of the last half year of his life in bed, at home, or in a hospital, but continued writing the column. He died on April 1, 1966.

After his death his literary legacy would live on. His wife had *The Third Policeman* published in 1967, and in 1973 Patrick C. Power wrote an English translation of *An Béal Bocht*, authorized by Evelyn O'Nolan and published as *The Poor Mouth* by Flann O'Brien. These have helped ensure O'Nolan's reputation.Yet, in a way it can be difficult to assess Brian O'Nolan/ Flann O'Brien/Myles na Gopaleen as columnist. *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, and *An Béal Bocht* were not huge commercial or critical successes in their own day, but today they, and to a lesser extent *The Hard Life*, are highly regarded and provide abundant fodder for academic study and doctoral dissertations (mine included). Writing in the "New Fiction Forum" of the *Boston Review*, Roger Boylan declares that O'Nolan's work is "becoming about as cherished as avant-garde literature can ever expect to be, and not just among the cognoscenti. Flann O'Brien is chic. University courses in his writings proliferate."[30] Today, O'Nolan could live comfortably off the royalties of those novels, as well as of the anthologies of his newspaper columns.

Cruiskeen Lawn, the collected columns, has been more problematic to evaluate, however. Certainly it is lauded as a source of humor, although knee-slapping humor was not O'Nolan's primary objective. There would be little argument with R.F. Foster's observation that O'Nolan was "uniquely successful in persuading the Irish that they took themselves too seriously,"[31] but the prevailing sense among many critics seems to be that the newspaper column was something less than what O'Nolan the writer was capable of producing.

Cronin, who in addition to being a broadcaster, columnist, critic, editor, novelist, and poet, was a confidant of O'Nolan's, writes of "contemporary Dublin's currency of dismissal," of O'Nolan, and of "early, unfulfilled brilliance,"[32] but Cronin seems to be subscribing to that evaluation himself when he writes, "The penalty of journalism . . . is that it gives its author a certain amount of warranted creative satisfaction."[33]

Declan Kiberd, who uses the word "brilliance" to describe *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Third Policeman*, and *An Béal Bocht*, addresses the question of whether, had Myles na gCopaleen never existed, the genius of Flann O'Brien

would have flowered in other masterpieces. Kiberd offers a tentative yes, with the caveat that the person to blame is not Myles na gCopaleen (i.e., the novelist) but Myles na Gopaleen (i.e., the newspaper columnist), because the column offered the quick success and easy laughs that hold a deadly attraction for the Irish artist.[34]

Hugh Kenner weighs in with this devastating question: "Was it the drink was his ruin, or was it the column? For ruin is the word. So much promise has seldom produced so little."[35] The newspaper column, as far as Kenner was concerned, "used him up."[36]

Even Boylan, who lavishes praise upon O'Nolan, writes, near the end of his article, that while O'Nolan was enjoying repute for the column, "he no longer sought the heights of literary achievement."[37]

The lack of literary respect for the columns could also be reflected in the comment offered by Anne Clune, who wrote the entry on O'Nolan for the *Dictionary of Irish Literature*: "There was a slow deterioration in standards over the years, and certainly the best work was produced before 1945."[38] The time period offered by Clune encompasses the three major novels and the beginning of the newspaper column, and allows a reader to infer that the quality of most of the columns was inferior.

Finally, Joseph O'Connor, while unabashedly declaring a fondness for both O'Nolan's writing and the Myles persona, expresses grave misgivings about the newspaper columns. He states that Myles saw himself as a protector of the English language, but in doing so was

> answering a question that nobody was asking and raising other questions in the process. Why would a genius able to do so much with words settle for so little? What did he get from stamping on fleas when he could have created dragons? No Irish writer of his era was funnier, but so what? It breaks my heart that he wasted so much time.[39]

O'Connor calls *The Best of Myles*, the collection of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, "the chronicle of failure foretold" and adds, "[W]hen you're mainly using your typewriter to generate disposable amusement, the clever trash starts to seep back up your fingers and into your soul."[40] And this is in a piece by a self-identified fan of O'Nolan.

But then there are the scholars who wholeheartedly insist on the literary merits of the columns, rejecting those who would smugly dismiss literary discourse because of the slightest whiff of journalese; ergo, it didn't have the literary pedigree, according to the snobbery of the effete litterateur. Richard Fallis calls the material a "brilliant series of essays" and adds that "All of O'Nolan's work could be described as a series of brilliant farragoes of distinctly Irish experience."[41] Moreover, the view that *Cruiskeen Lawn* at best provided

highbrow entertainment and at worst sabotaged O'Nolan's creative genius has been challenged by Jon Day. In his "Cuttings from *Cruiskeen Lawn*: Bibliographical Issues in the Republication of Myles na Gopaleen's Journalism," Day offers a vigorous argument that *Cruiskeen Lawn* was itself worthy of the term "literature," but has suffered because critics have attempted to make the column conform to the novels and also because today the columns are grouped thematically in anthologies, rather than appearing in the order in which O'Nolan wrote them.[42] Day cites Joseph Brooker's *Flann O'Brien*,[43] in which Brooker has contributed a paper, "Myles' Tones."

It is likely that *Cruiskeen Lawn* will continue to risk being viewed skeptically by some academics who are suspicious of any writing that is not footnoted or that has popular appeal. However, the fact that Day's article appears in a book derived from the proceedings of an international symposium held at O'Nolan's alma mater in 2006 to mark the fortieth anniversary of his death, and, further, that international conferences to honor the centenary of his birth were held in Dublin, Vienna, and Australia in 2011 all attest to his stature as a literary figure.[44] He continues to be remembered and valued, and it is quite reasonable to expect that, regardless of the "literary" merit assigned to his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, his stature derived at least in part from his columns is likely to grow in the future.

Donald McNamara is an assistant professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, teaching literature, composition, and professional writing, including journalism. He has a doctorate in English Literature from The Catholic University of America; his dissertation was "Flann O'Brien and Liam O'Flaherty: Refashioning Myth and Nationhood." He spent more than twenty years as a print journalist.

Notes

1. W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner/Simon & Shuster, 1996), 108.

2. Although the name "Gaelic" is often used for the language, strictly speaking it is incorrect, and "Irish" is the preferred term. Gaelic comes from the Irish-language word for the language, "*Gaeilge*," and can refer to both the language and the people—the Gael were "us," the Gall (stranger, foreigner) were "them." Today, "Gaelic" meaning language refers primarily to Scottish Gaelic, which became a separate language in the sixteenth century. In Ireland, "Gaelic" can refer to lineage or heritage.

3. The family name is itself a story. Brian O'Nolan's father Michael was known by the surnames Nolan, O'Nolan and the Irish-language version Ó Nualláin (Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, London: Paladin/Grafton, 1990), 4.

4. Almost every Irish writer of note, other than Joyce, ironically, ran afoul of this Act. To O'Nolan's disappointment, his novel *The Hard Life* didn't make the list. Anyone interested in trenchant, if biting, comments on the Act can consult J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 158–59, or Julia Carlson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (Athens, Ga,: University of Georgia Press,1990).,

5. Anthony Cronin. *No Laughing Matter* (London: Paladin, 1990), 63–64.

6. Myles na Gopaleen (Flann O'Brien), *The Best of Myles* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 96–97.

7. The word "gombeen" is a heavily freighted one in Ireland. It refers to moneylenders who are Irish (as opposed to English) and who thus take advantage of their own people. It comes from the Irish word gaimbín, meaning "bit, additional bit, (exorbitant) interest." (Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, Baile Átha Cliath: Richview Browne & Nolan, 1977) s.v.

8. Anthony Cronin, *Heritage Now* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 203.

9. Stephen Jones, *A Flann O'Brien Reader* (New York: Viking, 1978), 171. Jones also notes that a "ball of malt" (glass of whisky) was served in a pony glass.

10. *The Best of Myles*, 41–42.

11. John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood* (New York: Taplinger, 1975), 129.

12. The word comes from the Irish *seanchaí*, "custodian of tradition, historian; reciter of ancient lore, traditional story-teller." Ó Dónaill, s.v. It is often written in English as "shanachie."

13. *The Best of Myles*, 154.

14. Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork University Press, 1995), gives the definition of shaughran as "fool,"30. Ó Dónaill translates seachrán as "wandering, straying; aberration, error, delusion; derangement, distraction," s.v.

15. R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life* , (Oxford University Press, 1997), 478–82. Foster notes that the issue was not as clear-cut as Yeats believed and that the advent of Home Rule exacerbated the contentious feelings of participants.

16. *The Best of Myles*, 158–62.

17. Steven Curran, "'No, This Is Not From *The Bell*': Brian O'Nolan's 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* Anthology." *Eire-Ireland* 23 , no. 2 (Spring 1997): 79–92.

18. *The Best of Myles*, 15.

19. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 70–71.

20. Curran, 82–86.

21. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 150–60.

22. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter* 193–94.

23. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 194.

24. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 241.

25. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 258.

26. O'Nolan's brother Ciarán denies the book was a satire, calling it instead "a piece of natural exuberance—fun for the sake of fun…" Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O'Nolan/Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen*, trans. Róisín Ní Nualláin, (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998), 107.

27. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 233.

28. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 248.

29. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 268.

30. Roger Boylan, "We Laughed, We Cried," *Boston Review*, July/August 2008, 39.

31. R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 518, footnote.

32. Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 180.

33. Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails* (Dublin: Lilliput, 199), 117.

34. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 512.

35. Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 255.

36. Kenner, *A Colder Eye*, 257.

37. Boylan, "We Laughed, We Cried," 44.

38. Anne Clune, "Brian O'Nolan, *Dictionary of Irish Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 989.

39. Joseph O'Connor. "Laughter in the Graveyard." *The Dublin Review*, 44: Autumn 2011, 31.

40. Ibid.

41. Richard Fallis, *The Irish Renaissance* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1977), 218.

42. Jon Day, "Cuttings from *Cruiskeen Lawn*: Bibliographical Issues in the Republication of Myles na Gopaleen's Journalism," in *"Is It About a Bicycle?": Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2011), 33.

43. Joseph Brooker, *Flann O'Brien* (Tavistock, U.K.: Northcote House, 2005).

44. "100 Myles: The International Flann O'Brien Centenary Conference" University of Vienna, July 2011; "Flann O'Brien Centenary Conference" Trinity College Dublin, October 2011; "Flann O'Brien and Modernism Conference" University of New South Wales, November 2011. In addition, "The Contemporary: An International Conference on Literature and the Arts" at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore in June 2011 featured a colloquium on Flann O'Brien's work.