

***The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien.* Edited by Maebh Long. Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive, 2018. Pp. 603 (cloth).**

*Reviewed by Joseph Brooker, Birkbeck, University of London.*

Meanwhile I'm once again entering hospital for blood transfusions and other boons.

With kind regards,  
Yours sincerely,

These are the last words written by Flann O'Brien in this book, concluding a letter from 15 March 1966, two weeks before his death.<sup>1</sup> No name or signature follows. The reason is mundane and material: many of the hundreds of letters in the volume are reproduced not from originals posted to recipients but from carbon copies retained by the author, and these contain his typewritten text but not the handwritten signature that he added before posting. Yet it is curious and poignant to see him disappear at the last from his own life story. With a blank space where his name might be, he is gone, after 557 frequently extraordinary pages. Few books have offered more Flann O'Brien.

On the very first page of letters, an editor's footnote records the Irish poet Donagh MacDonagh's 1941 comment that Flann O'Brien was "a menace with a pen. Give him any book and he will sign it with any signature" (4, n.3). This is a neat bookend to the present book's lack of any final signature, but more immediately may have responded to the author's tendency to play games with other authors' names, imagining a book-handling service which for a fee would insert fake annotations from Bernard Shaw or Joseph Conrad into one's personal library.<sup>2</sup> To talk of multiple signatures also invokes a question rarely avoidable in discussion of Flann O'Brien: his multiplication of names and, to an extent, authorial identities. The man behind Flann O'Brien was primarily known as Brian O'Nolan—who signs off most of the letters accordingly, whether as

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<sup>1</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive, 2018), 557. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> See Myles na Gopaleen (Flann O'Brien), *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), 21.

“Brian O’Nolan,” “Brian O’N,” “Brian,” “B. O’N,” “BO’N,” “BON” or even just “B.”

Born in Strabane in the North of Ireland in 1911, O’Nolan spent most of his life as a Dubliner. (It is entertaining to learn from a footnote that as late as 1961 O’Nolan’s friend Niall Montgomery was telling the *Irish Times* that O’Nolan should not presume to pronounce on Dublin’s architecture: “not a Dublinman!” [396, n.58]). A Catholic and graduate of University College Dublin, where he began to generate his comic literary style in student magazines, O’Nolan in 1934-1935 co-produced the short-lived but brilliant comic magazine *Blather* with his friends, before joining the Irish civil service for a steady livelihood that lasted until his exit on health grounds in 1953. At the same time he attempted to develop a literary career from his peculiar talent for wild yet intricate comedy, seeing the dazzling montage of *At Swim-Two-Birds* published as his debut novel by Longmans in London in 1939. The rapidly-written, astonishingly inventive follow-up, *The Third Policeman*, was not taken up by publishers, and O’Nolan seems hardly to have considered writing another novel in English for twenty years. Meanwhile he entered the pages of the *Irish Times* first by bombarding it with parodic letters to the editor, then by commencing the regular column, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, which ran from 1940 to his death in 1966. “Flann O’Brien” was conceived for the mischievous letters and redeployed as the author’s name on his first novel: it would subsequently serve on all his novels written in English, as O’Nolan compartmentalised his pen-names. His other great persona, Myles na gCopaleen, was famed in Ireland as the author of *Cruiskeen Lawn* and also appeared as the notional “editor” of his satirical peasant memoir *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*), written in Irish and published in 1941. “Myles” was also the purported author of O’Nolan’s largest ventures into the theatre: the political satire *Faustus Kelly*, first performed at the Abbey Theatre, and *Rhapsody in Stephen’s Green*, first performed at the Gaiety, both in 1943. The simpler variant spelling Myles na Gopaleen was used for later columns and for the numerous comedy scripts that O’Nolan wrote for nascent Irish television in the early 1960s. By now O’Nolan, quietly married but increasingly cantankerous in writing, had issued further regular newspaper columns under the names George Knowall and John James Doe, and witnessed a late career revival as *At Swim-Two-Birds* was reissued in 1960 by MacGibbon & Kee in London. For the same publisher, and for US publication, he revived the Flann O’Brien brand and

promptly produced two more novels, *The Hard Life* (1961) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), the second of which was successfully adapted for the stage a year later as *When the Saints Go Cycling In*. He was still confidently working on another, *Slattery's Sago Saga*, when ill health finally overtook him in 1966.

O'Nolan was a significant character in Dublin's public and media life, and Myles na gCopaleen came closer to immortality when his brother Kevin compiled a generous selection of early *Irish Times* columns as *The Best of Myles* for publication in 1968. The swift posthumous publication of *The Third Policeman*, along with the increased availability of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, enabled his reassessment as a mid-century experimental novelist, to read beside Borges or Calvino. His old friend Anthony Cronin produced a valuable biography in 1989. Yet a fully scholarly treatment, of the kind meted out to some of his Irish literary peers, seemed hardly in prospect until the 2010s. Now, in the wake of Carol Taaffe's outstanding critical study *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass* (2008), an International Flann O'Brien Society coalesced at a 2011 symposium in Vienna, which has become a substantial, biannual, and peripatetic event. The Society has highlighted artists and writers happy to explore O'Nolan's influence. Regular volumes of critical essays appear, along with an impressively readable academic journal. New scholarly and annotated editions of *Cruiskeen Lawn* are planned. *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* arrives on this scene.

Its arrival still seems remarkable. An edition of letters has long seemed a good idea, but how it might actually be produced was less clear. A "Sheaf of Letters" had appeared in a special issue of the *Journal of Irish Literature* in 1974: this was interesting, but far from exhaustive, and we can now see that even the letters it did include were sometimes heavily edited.<sup>3</sup> Several key letters were extensively quoted by Cronin, and thus became standard points of reference in critical discussion. Nonetheless, under a decade ago, people who had visited some of the relevant archives were privately declaring that there was insufficient material to produce a book. Yet the scholarly wave was gathering. While the journal and symposia gained momentum, and Dalkey Archive (now, in effect, living up to its name as an official publisher for Flann O'Brien) produced new,

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<sup>3</sup> See Brian O'Nolan, "A Sheaf of Letters," ed. Robert Hogan and Gordon Henderson, in *Journal of Irish Literature* 3.1 (January 1974): 65-103.

inclusive editions of the plays and short stories, the Irish academic Maebh Long published her first monograph: *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (2014), which approached the work through critical theory. The book won the Society's biannual award, but it could hardly have prepared the reader for what Long would do next. In the space of perhaps three years she has combed archives, chased sources, made public appeals for letters, and put together a volume that with all its annotations and apparatus stands at well over 600 pages. It is the heftiest testimony yet to a new approach to this writer, dedicated to completeness and historical accuracy.

The volume's scale and significance make a factual description desirable. Long's Introduction offers not just an elegant summary of the letters ahead and their relation to our sense of O'Nolan, but three subsections—Selection, Presentation, Annotation—explaining the rationale of the volume's construction. Under "Presentation," Long outlines the standardisation of dates, locations and addressees, and the treatment of textual errors. As Long notes, O'Nolan increasingly makes typos, requiring the editor's "[sic]," but he also tangles this issue with his penchant for puns. The section on "Annotation" provides criteria for the volume's extensive editorial footnotes. Many of these contain detailed information about the specific correspondence on the page above, as well as explaining initials, abbreviations or foreign words. They also include numerous biographical outlines of persons mentioned in the letters. A large number of these, such as politicians and businessmen, are historically and locally specific and relatively obscure to a contemporary international readership. Others – Charles Dickens, Adolf Hitler, John F. Kennedy – are well known, and there is a deadpan element to Long's introduction of them on the same plane. After the letters themselves, a Select Bibliography and three Indexes constitute over another forty pages. More intriguing than these, in fact, is the opening Chronology of O'Nolan's life (xxxiii-xxxvii). One would expect this to be standard fare, but in fact it contains striking details even for the seasoned reader: confirmation of O'Nolan's much-contested travels in Germany (xxxiii), his rarely-mentioned 1953 translation of a play into Irish (xxxv), and the fact that between 1947 and 1962 he was involved in five car crashes and one "bus accident," on one occasion sustaining a "fractured skull" (xxxv-xxxvi). We do not learn who was at the wheel, in this string of mishaps that were hardly foregrounded by Cronin's biography. The extent of Long's labour, especially her

introductory clarification of textual criteria, comes as a surprise, simply because it is unprecedented. Such apparatus is customary in major editions of Coleridge or Yeats, but the reader realises that there has never, until now, been a scholarly edition in English of anything written by Flann O'Brien—save, to a degree, Robert Tracy's excellent 1994 edition of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*.

As for "Selection": while Long admits to the likelihood that some letters remain missing ("lying forgotten in someone's attic" [xx]), she also makes plain the grounds on which she has excluded material: short notes, memoranda, multiple copies of a given letter. While the edition appears impressively inclusive, rare anomalies may be detected. For instance, Cronin's biography reproduces in full a letter from O'Nolan to his friend the lawyer Tommy Conolly, written on 10 March 1964, which does not appear in the *Collected Letters*.<sup>4</sup> Much of O'Nolan's surviving professional correspondence as a civil servant has been consciously omitted, and Long proposes that another editor might make a further volume of it (xxi), though what has been included from that realm is intriguing not least in demonstrating the mode of writing that O'Nolan deployed in the office. In its professional formality—"Copies of your previous communications were forwarded to the Department of Finance and the Department of Industry and Commerce, and on the 4<sup>th</sup> instant the Minister wrote personal letters to the two Ministers urging them to expedite the submission of their views" (84)—it unsurprisingly shows a certain consonance with the deliberate pedantry that O'Nolan deployed in his comic writing. A reading of O'Nolan's creative work in the full light of his civil service career, pursuing shared themes and discursive contexts as has been done with Franz Kafka's work in insurance, is one critical task that has yet to be extensively attempted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989), 239-40. Subsequent references to this book are given in the text as *NLM* followed by page number.

<sup>5</sup> A relevant reference point is Franz Kafka, *The Office Writings*, ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner, trans. Eric Patton and Ruth Hein (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). For an adumbration of links between this work and Kafka's fiction see Michael Wood, "Double Thought," *London Review of Books* 30.22 (20 November 2008): 3-5.

A crucial characteristic of the volume is its inclusion of a number of letters to, as well as from, Brian O’Nolan. The most prolific authors of these include Hilton Edwards of the Gate Theatre; Hugh Leonard, author of *When the Saints Go Cycling In*; Niall Sheridan, a long-term friend and collaborator; Timothy O’Keeffe, crucial in O’Nolan’s late-career revival as a novelist; Patience Ross, a member of staff for O’Nolan’s agents A.M. Heath; and the American novelist and playwright William Saroyan, who met O’Nolan in Dublin in the summer of 1939 and for a while sent him warm and free-spirited letters from as far away as New York and San Francisco. A still smaller number of letters included here are neither from nor to O’Nolan, but pertinent to him: a fine example is Niall Sheridan’s letter to O’Keeffe ahead of the 1960 reissue of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, offering a first-hand account of James Joyce’s reaction to the novel (244-5). Niall Montgomery presents a special case, for he and O’Nolan were intimate enough to write over each others’ letters and send them back and forth. Thus, as well as complete letters from Montgomery, the volume contains letters from O’Nolan with Montgomery’s annotations to them added in italics. These remarkable dialogues aside, the criteria for the selection of letters from others to O’Nolan are not wholly clear, though they are all rich and welcome additions to the story. We are granted not only O’Nolan’s important 1942 letter to Sean O’Casey, but also the letter from O’Casey, praising *An Béal Bocht*, that prompted it (114-17): a rare and noteworthy exchange from two of the greatest Irish writers of the era. The letters from Hugh Leonard (522-4, 528-30) contain unusually spirited contestations of O’Nolan’s own positions, late in life, not least his instinct towards self-censorship on religious matters. And Patience Ross writes with splendid professional dryness, at the dawn of O’Nolan’s career, that *At Swim-Two-Birds* has “almost every possible defect from the commercial point of view. On which encouraging note I leave you to get on with the new book which I hope you are writing” (7). Eighteen months later, with that book complete, she strikes a comparable note: “Having read it, I have a complete belief in de Selby and a gnawing doubt as to the chances of the book making money for you” (68). Long’s extensive footnoted summaries of letters to O’Nolan are a little less entertaining, but often essential to understanding what he is talking about on the page above.

The letters are demarcated into years—each year’s letters commencing on a new headed page—and, on another level, into broad chronological sections. 1934-

1939 takes about 60 pages, almost all of which covers 1938-1939; no letter from O’Nolan is presented from before 1938. 1940-1947 consumes almost 90 pages; seemingly no letters survive from the late 1940s. The complete 1950s fill just over 80 pages—which takes us to page 239. In a book containing 557 pages of correspondence, this means that well over half the letters are from the years 1960-1966, which are divided into two sections of their own. O’Nolan appears aware of the growing bulk of his late correspondence, writing in 1965 that he is building up a pile of correspondence about his late fiction (primarily *The Dalkey Archive*) which could be offered for sale to a collector alongside manuscripts of the novels. His statement that “I have two thick files of correspondence about this book with agents, publishers and a lot of other people. I am sure a bystander would think a lot of this very funny and, indeed, it is the substance of a separate book itself” (468) is so self-referential that Dalkey Archive have reproduced it on the back cover of the *Collected Letters*. It is intriguing to see O’Nolan, late in life, trying to supplement his limited income by manipulating an emergent market for authors’ manuscripts and letters: this would now readily be considered an episode in the publishing and bibliographic history of modernism. (It is still more extraordinary to read his account of the theft of this material by an unfamiliar visitor to the house, and its subsequent retrieval by the police [408-9, 455].) That O’Nolan deliberately preserved late letters for eventual sale may be one reason that the volume is so heavily weighted towards them. Another may be that so much of the late correspondence deals with the publishing of his novels (an issue hardly at stake through most of the 1940s and 1950s), primarily through O’Keeffe in London, Cecil Scott in New York, and the agents A.M. Heath, and these recipients archived this correspondence for professional purposes as well as for any literary worth. Another factor again may be simply that later correspondence, mainly produced in O’Nolan’s last address in the Dublin suburb of Stillorgan, could be gathered for preservation by his widow Evelyn, while many of the communications of the 1930s or 1940s were long since scattered and discarded.

The effect, in any case, is to make the latter half of the book an intensive slog through the details of the production, publicity, royalties and so on of later works and publications: above all *The Dalkey Archive* and its theatrical adaptation, with attention also paid to the emerging French and German translations of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Most of us think that Brian O’Nolan’s creative peak was, say, 1932-

1945, which means that much of this book amounts to an extended view of his creative afterlife. Cronin states that O’Nolan and his wife were short of money in his last decade (*NLM* 218-19), and O’Nolan’s letters repeatedly show him looking for jobs—a mode in which he smartens up his self-presentation and affects urbane worldliness. Nonetheless, strictly in terms of remuneration for his art, the 1960s appear to have been O’Nolan’s most lucrative years, as he repeatedly and hearteningly managed to secure contracts and advances for new works. Insofar as literary scholars are increasingly interested in writers as deal-makers in the marketplace of publishing, the collection provides a rich new mine of raw material. The preponderance of later letters ensures one other emphasis: O’Nolan’s frequent health troubles. Numerous letters are written from hospital, or spin yarns from particular encounters with doctors. The following declaration, in response to a contractual offer from O’Keeffe, is quite typical:

I’m sorry for some delay in returning it but I lent it to a German for a strict perusal of 24 hours, not knowing that in this interval I was going to be involved in a car crash. After 24 hours unconscious in a hospital bed, a young doctor told me that there wasn’t a damned thing wrong with me but a fractured skull. (303)

In some writers’ correspondence, such a statement would announce the greatest physical drama of their lives; in O’Nolan’s, the misadventure is par for the course, as he bounces from one seemingly desperate medical crisis to another with the tenacity of a cartoon character. “Never a dull moment” is a stoical refrain (266). Cronin’s observation of O’Nolan’s courage and humour in the face of pain (*NLM* 220) is confirmed, though Long also justifiably finds poignancy in the extent of his physical suffering at the end (xv).

Beside these later accounts of finance and health, details are slimmer of what lies behind the creative works that draw most of us to Flann O’Brien in the first place. It is of great interest, though, to watch him negotiate *At Swim-Two-Birds* with Longmans, pragmatically and with no artistic egotism, and to see *The Third Policeman* flicker into view then pass away again. An early letter to Niall Montgomery’s father also imagines a translation of James Stephens’s *The Crock of Gold* (1912) into Irish, an idea that Long’s footnote hints could have influenced *The Third Policeman* (20-21). The first decade or two of material

here only seem quantitatively slight beside the comparatively immense amount that has survived from the 1960s. Flann O'Brien's 1930s and 1940s, even if they amount to less than 150 pages, are utterly compelling for a reader already engaged with his life and work.

The plurality of names deployed by O'Nolan naturally recurs, and demands the reviewer's attention across the volume. The second item included, a fragment of a letter from Sheridan to Montgomery, refers to O'Nolan as "The O'Blather himself" (5), after the titular persona of their magazine. As noted above, most letters are signed Brian O'Nolan, though some professional letters, including one to his bank manager in 1953, add variety in being signed "Brian Nolan" (181, 244, 248, 251). O'Nolan's father Michael had similarly varied the precise rendition of his name (*NLM* 3-4). Timothy O'Keeffe first writes to the author as Brian Nolan, and O'Nolan's first few letters back to O'Keeffe are signed with the same surname (228-9, 253, 256), conceivably suggesting that, aware at some level of O'Keeffe's potential influence on his career, he is humbly mimicking his usage. The variation of the names O'Nolan and Nolan usually seems arbitrary and insignificant—thus, for instance, his work on a special issue of the magazine *Envoy* in 1951 is consistently attributed to Brian Nolan, and *Envoy's* editor John Ryan happily reproduced the name when republishing the material in 1970. (Then again, Ryan also reproduced the canard that O'Nolan had been "an acquaintance of James Joyce.")<sup>6</sup> But even here, consistency is hard to find. Cronin quotes a 1937 note to his civil service managers protesting against the use of the surname "Nolan," and seemingly implying that another form of the name would be preferable (*NLM* 78-9). This note, which memorably declares that "My own name is one of the few subjects upon which I claim to be an authority," does not appear in the *Collected Letters*: perhaps this is for good reason, yet the omission is regrettable given the thematic importance of its content.

Long rightly observes that the majority of the letters are pragmatic rather than literary or fanciful (xvii), yet the author's name can still be unpredictable. Leaving aside the one-off coinage "Brian Bureau" (a play on the historic Irish

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<sup>6</sup> See John Ryan, ed., *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish* (Brighton: Clifton Books, 1970), 13-15, 251.

chieftain Brian Boru, with an ingenious hint of the penman and former bureaucrat) in a letter to friends (400), variation primarily happens in such public texts as Letters to the Editor. One to the *Standard* newspaper fiercely defending *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* is signed “THE TRANSLATOR OF THE INSECT PLAY” (135). In some letters to the *Irish Times*, and one to *Kavanagh's Weekly*, he is Myles na gCopaleen or na Gopaleen—logically enough, as he is maintaining a public presence (152, 163, 265, 453, 491). Perhaps more surprisingly, Flann O'Brien is revived as a correspondent in the 1960s, claiming six letters to the press (305, 354, 451, 454, 464, 474); the name's resurrection is probably connected to its parallel revival in O'Nolan's career as a novelist. O'Nolan also sometimes deploys his pseudonyms in private correspondence. To three press editors in the 1960s he is “M. na G.” or “Myles na Gopaleen” (364, 389, 556), as though Myles, not his creator Brian, is handling his own professional affairs. When a serious and extensive approach to Underwood typewriters proposing a new method of typing Irish script is signed Myles na Gopaleen (442), the sense is that O'Nolan seeks to benefit from the public authority of his *Irish Times* persona. And a reply to Sheila Wingfield, Lady Powerscourt—who we may guess wrote to Myles courtesy of the *Irish Times*—has it both ways: “M. Na G. Brian O'Nolan” (228).

O'Nolan was a native Irish speaker. It is not too surprising that he writes two letters in Irish here and signs them, in 1943 and 1956 respectively, “B. Ó Nualláin” and “Brian Ó Nuallain” (139-40, 211). It is more surprising that in 1962 he looks himself up in the catalogue of the National Library of Ireland, and complains in a letter to the library, first that the catalogue is potentially damaging in disclosing the link between the pseudonym Flann O'Brien and the real “O NUALLAIN,” and second—the real oddity here—that “My name is not O Nualláin and I have never called myself that. My name, as my birth certificate attests, is O'Nolan” (318). As Long's footnote quietly notes, Ó Nualláin “was the name O'Nolan was often known by in UCD and the civil service” (315, n.165), and Cronin records that he was confirmed after probation in the civil service under the same name (*NLM* 79). One might deduce from this episode that the later O'Nolan had a resistance to Irish, which at any rate he was no longer using for professional purposes. More evidently, it stands simply as an instance of his contrarianism: as soon as he finds himself to be officially catalogued under a

particular name—even having sought out the categorisation himself—he chafes at it and denies its validity.

All this is not to mention the true efflorescence of multiple names in the letter-column controversies of 1940. Here a parodic spat started by “F. O’Brien” (74) is taken up by Lir O’Connor and by numerous other characters not represented in this volume but only mentioned in the editor’s footnotes: Whit Cassidy, Hilda Upshott, Luna O’Connor, N.S. Harvey, Jno. O’Ruddy, and more. Some of these were likely O’Nolan, some perhaps Montgomery and Sheridan; more precise authorship has not been established, and Long notes that others have claimed involvement (xxii). The letter-column controversies are more fully represented in John Wyse Jackson’s pioneering, peerlessly comic collection of O’Nolan’s early writings *Myles Before Myles* (1988), but the *Collected Letters* has the considerable virtue of presenting an entire controversy absent from that volume. A 1939 tussle with Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain around O’Connor’s play *Time’s Pocket* (24-40 *passim*) is carried out primarily by Flann O’Brien, who gives his address as Tintern Abbey. The quarrel is also foreshadowed in 1938, with the same correspondent picking at the Cork writers’ pretentiousness with the superb creative pedantry of his youth (12-19 *passim*).

The interest here is not only in being granted a fresh helping of the young O’Nolan at his best, nor even in witnessing the cultural politics of his quarrel with two of the most vocal Irish literati of the era. It is also that at the same time as making these public forays, O’Nolan can be seen negotiating with Longmans about *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in a peculiar counterpoint that plays out on literally the same pages. Two days after Flann O’Brien’s latest stingingly satirical letter for the *Irish Times*, he writes to Longmans’ advertising manager that “I am naturally anxious to retrieve my anonymity as much as possible” (19), meaning primarily that the firm should not mention his real name; if he must explain it away, then “I could be quoted as the author’s agent or something like that” (20)—one of his most inadvertently suggestive descriptions of the relation between his multiple names. In the same letter he suggests Flann O’Brien as the name for *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ jacket, as though musingly happening on it for the first time, despite the fact that he has been using it to attack O’Faolain and O’Connor for almost a month. A curious alternation is on show—to the reader of the *Collected Letters*, but perhaps to no individual at the time—in which

O’Nolan repeatedly ventures forth into public satire and, literally in the next letter, expresses prudent concern about the risks of exposure. In an unpublished letter to the *Irish Press* in January 1939 he carefully withdraws himself from association with the forthcoming novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, “which is objectionable, even if non-existent” (22). Two days later he is writing to Longmans confirming Flann O’Brien as his pen-name for the same novel, and five days after that Flann O’Brien sallies forth again against his high-minded rivals in the pages of the *Irish Times*.

If O’Nolan truly wanted to compartmentalise his writing and protect his identity—not least to comply with the strictures of the civil service—then he had a curiously contradictory and flamboyant way of going about it. After all, “Flann O’Brien” might have served respectably as the name on a book published from London, while allowing O’Nolan to carry on his projects in Dublin. The insistence on bringing him in to these local quarrels suggests an inability to resist the bait of notoriety and admiration at home, in a small world where the Custom House premises of the civil service, the offices of the *Irish Times*, and the bohemian banter of the Palace Bar were not far apart. The dual impulse visible here, towards display and concealment, is hardly pertinent by the 1960s, when O’Nolan, Myles, and Flann O’Brien seem a more casually overlapping public entity; but perhaps its structure finds an echo, even in that period, in O’Nolan’s alternations of bravado and self-deprecation about his own work. In April 1963 the half-finished *Dalkey Archive* is “amazing stuff, though utterly readable, straightforward and very funny,” a “masterpiece” (347). By the turn of the year, with his publishers bravely issuing sceptical assessments of the manuscript, he admits that it is “ruinously flawed” (361), and that “in parts the writing is awful” (376). Such an oscillating valuation of his own work, formed in part in response to the interlocutor of the moment, seems characteristic of the late O’Nolan, confirming Long’s percipient remark that, having restarted his career late in life, he retained the temper of a novice writer, “with all the financial insecurity, uncertain reputation, vulnerability, and bluster that entails” (xvi).

This review has only hinted at the range of recipients for O’Nolan’s letters. To be sure, swathes of the book’s latter half are taken up with letters to O’Keeffe, about financial and contractual matters as much as aesthetic ones. O’Nolan also writes often to O’Keeffe’s US counterpart Cecil Scott, repeatedly addressing him

as Cecil Ford: a mistake that the sharp wit of the 1930s would not have committed, and that—alcoholic befuddlement aside—perhaps derives from an abiding interest in the Ford motor company as a characteristic feature of the twentieth-century United States.<sup>7</sup> Other frequent recipients of post not mentioned above include Mark Hamilton and Hester Green at A.M. Heath (with which firm the later O’Nolan becomes truculently dissatisfied, but ultimately never breaks); and the London-based author Leslie Daiken, who brings out O’Nolan’s more rascally side. Yet what keeps stopping the reader in their tracks is the letter to an unexpected party on a topic that arrives out of the blue.

The 1952 approach to Bryan Walter Guinness, signed by Myles na gCopaleen and addressed with due deference to “Lord Moyne,” is an instance. O’Nolan recalls a visit to the Guinness brewery “towards the end of the last war,” and seeks to revive the idea of “an Irish-language edition of the Guinness Handbook,” representing himself as “the only man in the world who could do the job properly” (168). Lord Moyne’s response is not recorded. What is then more remarkable is that five years later O’Nolan writes to him again, asking for an academic reference for a post as assistant lecturer in English at Trinity College Dublin (223). (This request is mentioned in Cronin’s biography, but such a brief incident is easy to miss [*NLM* 208].) The letter would appear to imply that the two indeed had some contact in the intervening years. In any case, one may well feel that only Flann O’Brien could seek a reference for an academic post from one of the owners of Guinness. His initial approach to Lord Moyne has two other thematic sequels. In late 1961 he is approached by Leopold Stork, a producer of television commercials, seeking ideas to advertise Guinness. O’Nolan professes himself unable to help, yet immediately provides two concepts designed to play on viewers’ brains (290): the effect is like another Leopold, Bloom, dreaming up effective advertising campaigns in *Ulysses*.<sup>8</sup> And in 1964 he sends Jameson’s a proposal for a book on the history of Irish whiskey. The topic has evident proximity to O’Nolan’s daily activities, but Jameson’s reply is interesting at a profounder level, bespeaking Irish industry’s

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<sup>7</sup> See Andrew McFeaters, “Reassembling Ford: Time is Money in Brian O’Nolan’s Brave New Ireland,” *Parish Review* 3.1 (Fall 2014): 29-38.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular James Joyce, *Ulysses*, corrected text, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 559-60.

attempt to modernise itself in the era of Seán Lemass: “However interesting your book would be I fear that it would remind presentday readers about the unhappy past, and as such would tend to detract from the job which now has to be done—which is to encourage the smart set to enjoy our whiskey under modern conditions” (412-13).

These ventures to the giants of Irish brewing and distilling are at least consonant with what we typically think about Flann O’Brien. More striking still is his approach in 1955 to the Private Secretary of Viscount Brookeborough, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. Taking on an uncharacteristically finicky and obsequious tone (“May I introduce myself as a writer in many spheres of literary activity?”), he requests a “personal interview” with Lord Brookeborough. It appears most likely that this was aimed at generating journalistic copy, though O’Nolan goes out of his way to promise that no word of it will be reproduced without “the express permission of his Lordship.” Less likely, but more intriguing, is the possibility that O’Nolan wished to visit the drawing-rooms of political power and perhaps even subtly influence the politics of Northern Ireland. His claim, as a native of Tyrone, to “understand the situation of the North thoroughly” provides a new, if narrowly glimpsed, angle on his political preoccupations (197).

The surprises keep coming, most often via bold initiatives from O’Nolan that are never realised. In October 1955 he claims to be setting up a new magazine, *The Dublin Man*, which will carry copy from Aneurin Bevan (200). The purported connection is all the more surprising as Myles na gCopaleen had written sceptically of the prospect of a post-war welfare state for Ireland.<sup>9</sup> In 1965 he proposes that the French translation of *At Swim-Two-Birds* be translated back into English, perhaps by a suitably isolated member of the French Foreign Legion, and all three versions published in one volume (484-5). The scheme, promptly knocked on the head by O’Keeffe, is surely worthy of Queneau or Perec. As late as 1965, less than a year before his death, he sends a literary agent a lengthy plan for a new work of non-fiction, *Golden Ireland Now and Then*.

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<sup>9</sup> See Steven Curran, “‘Could Paddy Leave Off from Copying Just for Five Minutes?’: Brian O’Nolan and Eire’s Beveridge Plan,” *Irish University Review* 31.2 (Autumn/Winter 2001): 353-76.

When he adds that the project will hereafter be referred to “GINAT” for short, it feels like a parody from the early *Cruiskeen Lawn*—but the proposal appears entirely serious (489).

As Long notes, O’Nolan’s letters to his friend Dorine Davin show an unfamiliar facet: affectionate, unpretentious, consistently self-deprecating. More extensive is the correspondence of 1939-40 with William Saroyan, who waxes romantic about Ireland as “really majestic: there is nothing like it in America” (77). O’Nolan’s tendency to impersonation and pastiche finds a perhaps unwitting outlet in his adoption of American idiom to address Saroyan (“are you thinking of seeing a dame?” [93]), but in fact the enthusiasm and openness of these pages, which feel uncharacteristic of the great satirist, are peculiar in their normality: they are the kind of fond, curious, self-effacing letters that many people in their twenties have written to friends. It is sad that, having lost touch with Saroyan, he later tells another correspondent that “I never cared much for his whimsical material” (271), a claim belied by the enthusiasm of the earlier letters. A different case is the correspondence with Montgomery, which is so rooted in decades of acquaintance that it sometimes enters a kind of code. Montgomery’s published writings can be arch, seeming to corroborate Cronin’s description of a detached and involuted personality (*NLM* 50-1).<sup>10</sup> But here he emerges as a model of forbearance, remaining quietly loyal even after O’Nolan has plagiarised his writing, coldly abused him, and sent him a farrago of intemperate opinion about other matters—not least, in an enthralling exchange, James and Stanislaus Joyce (312-17). Montgomery’s response to the first draft of *The Dalkey Archive* manages an admirable blend of perceptive critique and friendly encouragement, including the generous assessment that one scene is “as good as anything Mr Beckett has done (!)” (365). An additional benison of Montgomery’s correspondence with O’Nolan is the prevalence of one of the most cherished Mylesian devices, the pun. In quick succession O’Nolan himself, writing to both Montgomery and O’Keeffe, calls his work in progress *The Dalkey Ark-hive*, *The Dalkey Alcove*, and *The Dunkirk Alcove* (382, 384, 391). He seems spurred to this by a letter from Montgomery which casually refers to

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<sup>10</sup> For an exemplary case see Niall Montgomery, “Joyeux Quicum Ulysse ... Swissairis Dubellay Gadelice,” in Ryan, ed., *A Bash in the Tunnel*, 61-72.

both “the O.K. Dark Hive” and “The OkeyDoke Hive” (372). Montgomery’s immediately preceding letter, late in 1963, refers to “the greatest living Irish novelist, Phlegm O’Brine” (367-8). The blend of generosity and amused detachment is characteristic.

Phlegm O’Brine’s collected letters are a major event in the documentation of modern Ireland’s literary history. They have value, too, as historical documents more broadly construed: a rich archive of evidence about mid-twentieth-century Irish society. Maebh Long’s edition is the most significant publication by Brian O’Nolan since, at the least, *Myles before Myles* three decades ago. Given that most of that collection had previously, if obscurely, appeared in print, the *Collected Letters* is the most important production of hitherto unpublished material since the English translation of *An Béal Bocht* in 1973, or even—the assertion demands a deep breath—since the belated arrival in print of *The Third Policeman* over half a century ago. That is the scale of importance on which this volume, in an admirably attractive and reader-friendly paperback from OkeyDoke Hive, deserves to be considered. The pleasures of these largely private letters are not quite those of the Research Bureau or the Brother, recurring motifs of *Cruiskeen Lawn*; but in their own diverse ways they are as enthralling as the many thousands of words with which O’Nolan wove his alternative Ireland in public.