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In this issue:

FLANN, BRIAN AND MYLES

— but not in that order

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17 April If there is one thing that an editor resents more than anything else, it is having his own work edited. He knows that being the best editor in the world (which he readily admits he is not) does not necessarily make him a good writer, but this knowledge does not lessen the resentment.

Back in December a bloke in Melbourne named Jules Lewicki, editor of a magazine called *Bottom Line*, wrote to me and said that Lee Harding had given him my name 'as a person who would perhaps be interested in writing a review of Flann O'Brien's works'. I was interested, certainly, but not sure of my competence to do something like this. Jules stressed that he wanted just a general article about the writer and his work, rather than a profound piece of criticism, and I was thankful for that at least, since there are seven books by 'Flann O'Brien' in print, and each one of them is worthy of 2500-3000 words. I told Jules I would do it, but not before March. On the 1st of March he rang me and asked how it was coming along, and rang me again each week thereafter until I posted off the article just before Easter.

I was not happy with what I had written. After half a dozen false starts I had managed to do about 3000 words roughly along the line he wanted, but I didn't enjoy re-reading the article, not the way I enjoy re-reading some of my fanzine writing. The best things about it seemed to be the personal touch here and there, a few gentle jokes, and the Keats & Chapman anecdote that I had supplied with it.

Jules wasn't happy with it either. I rang him two days ago to make sure he had received it. It was written in *Nation Review* style, he said, too personal and self-indulgent. That's the way I write, I said. It's okay if the personality is interesting, he said. I was too dejected by this stage to bother saying anything rude to him; besides, I need the money. The Keats & Chapman story will have to go, he said, because you haven't explained what it's about. So, with that out, and all the personal bits out, I reckon Jules is left with about 400 words. I look forward, in a rather dismal way, to seeing what appears under my name in his magazine. Meanwhile, here is the article I wrote.

#### FLANN, BRIAN AND MYLES

It's a bit hard, trying to write a sober, scholarly article about Flann O'Brien, when you know next to nothing about the man and all you have by way of recommendation for the job is an endless capacity for delight in his work. But I'll have a bash at it.

When I first started reading Flann O'Brien, at a time when it was neither popular nor profitable... No, that'll never do.

*Yer Average Aussie Reader*: What will never do?

*Me*: Plagiarizing the man before I'm barely started.

Scrub that. I'm starting again, scholarly-like.

According to Dr Brian Cleeve's *Dictionary of Irish Writers*

(Mercier Press, Cork, 1967), Flann O'Brien was 'widely revered as The Sage of Santry'. Born in Strabane, County Tyrone, in 1912, O'Brien is well known for his novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Dalkey Archives*. Hang on: I'm not sure I like this scholarship. 'adventures of Yeats and Chapman' Yeats and Chapman? Good grief. Hm, turning now to James Joyce, Dr Cleeve mentions his famous novel *Finnegan's Wake*... Whatever Dr Cleeve got his doctorate for, it wasn't proofreading. Anyone want to buy a copy of Cleeve's *Dictionary of Irish Writers*, cheap? No? *Thunk!* — another \$1.70 down the drain.

Flann O'Brien, or Brian O'Nolan (as we shall call him here), was born in Strabane, County Tyrone, in 1911. Briain O Nuallain (pronounced 'Brian O'Nolan', roughly) wrote fiction as 'Flann O'Brien', and his column in the *Irish Times* appeared under the name 'Myles na gCopaleen' (or 'Gopaleen'). Benedict Kiely called him 'the three-headed man', and no wonder.

'After a brilliant career at University College, Dublin,' says the blurb in the Penguin edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 'he did linguistic research in Germany and then joined the Irish civil service.' The latter (wrote Bangsund, making it up as he went along, having run out of Facts) O'Nolan hated, as only one who is forced to dispense Irish civility all day and write immortal novels all night can hate it. But down at the Scotch House, a popular pub in Dublin much patronized by up-and-coming immortal Irish novelists, O'Nolan was making a name for himself — and getting into trouble with the publican for it, mainly because he was making his name with a penknife on the bar. The night the publican threw him out and told him to stay out, for good, he had carved the name FLYNN O'BROGAN, and he just knew he was getting close. Picking himself up from the gutter, he stood for a moment in deep thought, up to his ankles; then, whipping a piece of chalk from his pocket, he wrote in large letters on the pavement — FLANN O'BRIEN! Then he went home, whistling a jaunty *cantarachd* (filthy Irish filksong), and composed six short stories in impeccable Irish before supper.

I can't keep this up. No, I mean, I could keep it up, but I'm supposed to be writing a sober, scholarly article of a factual and preferably uplifting nature, and I'd better get back to it. If I keep on running short of Facts, well, after all, what are Facts but lies agreed upon? (One free copy Cleeve's dictionary to the first reader that spots the misquotation.)

In 1939 O'Nolan's first novel was published, and in the same year he started writing his 'Cruiskeen Lawn' column for the *Irish Times*. The novel was *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one of the funniest books ever written, possibly the most brilliant first novel ever published. The critics, most of them, were ecstatic about it. 'I wouldn't say I was exactly ecstatic about it' said one, whose name means nothing to us today; 'A book in a thousand' said Graham Greene; 'The literary debut of the century' said the *Spectator*; 'That's a real writer, with the true comic spirit' said James Joyce; 'Just the book to give your sister if she's a loud, dirty, boozy girl' said Dylan Thomas; 'Irish pornography at its impenetrable worst,' said the *Grong Grong Chronicle*, 'and not even illustrated.'

I confessed once to A.D. Hope that the novel I would most like to have written was *At Swim-Two-Birds*. 'Ah,' he said, 'the throwaway Irish novel.' I have never been game to ask him exactly what he meant by that, but I suspect the worst. Alec is a delightful bloke, but he's an academic, too, and *At Swim-Two-Birds* is not an academic's novel, not by an extended calcinated writing-instrument. *Yer Average Aussie Reader*: By a what? *Meself*: A long chalk. Sorry.

*At Swim-Two-Birds* is not an easy novel to get in to, and even when you're in it, not an easy novel to grasp. I have read it at least six times, and each time it has amazed and delighted me, opened up new vistas of imagination, thought and language, and generally made me feel like a writer's bootlace. You probably know the feeling. *At Swim-Two-Birds* gives me inexhaustible joy because it so brilliantly combines a delightful story (however digressive), an introduction to the main elements of Irish mythology (however oblique) and an insight, never more profoundly nor hilariously presented, into the Irish sense of humour (than which only the Russian could conceivably be more human). It's the kind of book Gogol might have written if he'd been born, a century later, in Ireland. It's the kind of book Spike Milligan might have written, if he'd had James Joyce's intellect and upbringing. In fact, Spike Milligan did write a book something like this: his *Puckoon* (a very funny book) is a kind of dole-bludger's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Was Brian O'Nolan ultimately responsible for the Goon Shows? There have been times when I have thought so. There are times, when I am watching *Monty Python* or *Fawlty Towers*, for example, when I think that the best kind of contemporary British humour is really Irish humour, traceable, through the Goon Shows, back to writers like O'Nolan, James Stephens, Oliver St John Gogarty and so on, and beyond them, to - well, how far can you go? You can go back to Duns Scotus, if you like. The great Irish scholar was once asked by a heathen king 'What is the difference between a Duns and a dunce?' 'The width of this table, milord,' he said, and got away with it, too.

During 1940-41 O'Nolan wrote at least two novels, one of them *The Third Policeman* (published 1967), another *An Beal Bocht* (first published in English in 1973, as *The Poor Mouth*). No matter how you look at it, *The Poor Mouth* is a vastly depressing novel. Sure, there are great helpings of humour, wit and side-splitting hilarity, but the overwhelming impression is of rain and spuds and futility, the Irishman's lot. Exaggerated, perhaps, especially to the Australian mind (despite the fact that this is precisely how many of our forbears felt about the country they had come from), but true, up to a point. There is fantasy here, too, as fantastic as anything ever imagined by the science-fiction writers, but this is true of all O'Nolan's novels.

Until a biography of Brian O'Nolan is published (or until I read it: for all I know, there may be such a book in print right now), I will have no idea when his novels were written. It surprises me not a little that *The Third Policeman* was written so long ago,

and this makes me wonder about the others. But from here on I'll go by publication dates.

In 1961 *The Hard Life* was published, and it is, I admit, a novel only for the confirmed 'Flann O'Brien' addict. It is good, of course, the kind of novel that would immediately secure for any Australian writer something of a reputation, but it is not up to the standard O'Nolan set elsewhere. The story has to do with one Collopy, who has dedicated himself to the noble objective of providing Dublin with rest-rooms for ladies. If for no other reason, you should read this book for the scene where Collopy meets the Pope, who finds himself being asked to exert his influence on the Corporation of Dublin for this purpose. But there are other reasons for reading it, as you will discover when you get round to it. My only strong recommendation about this book is that you should read O'Nolan's other novels before it, except *The Poor Mouth*, which you should read last of all.

*The Dalkey Archive* was published in 1964. The main characters in this fantastic story are James Joyce (a devout writer of religious tracts, who is furious about the bastard who has published those obscene novels under his name), St Augustine (him, yes: the Bishop of Hippo, long believed dead), a mad scientist named de Selby, and a policeman obsessed by bicycles. In many important respects, some so profound that I haven't noticed them yet, the novel harks back to or foreshadows *The Third Policeman*, in which de Selby and the policeman make their first or next appearance.

De Selby (I quote here, broadly, from an article written by another great Irish writer, Walt Willis\*) is a kind of humourless Charles Fort, who believes that time is an illusion caused by the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere. On the theological side, de Selby believes that God lost his primeval battle with Lucifer, and he proposes to remedy the present deplorable state of affairs by annihilating time -- and with it, the world that Lucifer has mischievously created. The book deals mainly with the efforts of the hero to prevent this catastrophe. In this he is aided by Sergeant Fottrell of the Dublin Police. The good sergeant has a bicycle, but he never rides it, for the sufficient reason provided by what he calls the Mollycule Theory. And what is that? Well, when a hammer repeatedly strikes on an anvil, you know, mollycules from the anvil will enter the hammer, and vice versa. And when human beings ride bicycles, especially on the bumpy roads of Ireland, the same process will occur. At this very moment, the sergeant assures us, many unfortunate people in Ireland have become more than half bicycle. If you can't imagine what might conceivably happen to a man who is half-bicycle, or a bicycle that is half-man, you must read this book. But the bikes and the mollycules are merely the beginning of the fun in this absurdly funny (and quite profound) book.

*The Third Policeman*, I am given to understand by learned young

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\* Which present readers will know is 'The Strange World of Flann O'Brien' (Warhoon, 1968; Philosophical Gas 26, 1974).





13 May Delighted at my reinstatement as a member of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (founded by William Caxton and Benjamin Franklin in the year nineteen-oh-dot), I rushed out a little fanzine eight days ago with the idea of getting it into FAPA's 159th mailing, the deadline for which is tomorrow (American time). But as some of you may have noticed, we have had a bit of trouble this week in the aviation business, and when I took SM 6 to Norwood Post Office on Monday the clerk said, yes, he would accept my \$7.70 (\$7.70 to airmail 136 sheets of paper!) but that the parcel would go by rail to Sydney and there it would sit until the flight-controllers ended their strike. The cheek of them! I thought as I spent the \$7.70 I'd saved on booze, Interfering with normal relations between Australia and FAPA! Who's running this country anyway? Naturally, I shall be voting Liberal next time, as a dumb (mute, sorry: mute) but heartfelt protest.

A LETTER today from the hairy hermit of Haymarket, Kevin Dillon, the second this month, and enclosed with it an article from Books & Bookmen, December 1976, about Flann O'Brien. (Did I write anything to Dillon about my article for Bottom Line, or is he esping again?) A most depressing article this, full of the most basic misconceptions about O'Nolan, badly written, quite ill informed. Mine, I mean, not Robert Eagle's in B&B. Strewh, yer wouldn't believe it! Eagle is reviewing a book by Anne Clissman, called *Flann O'Brien: a critical introduction to his writings* (Gill & Macmillan), which is just the book I needed for my article, apparently. I may be excused for not knowing about it back on page 4, but Eagle mentions an earlier book on the same subject — *Myles*, ed. Timothy O'Keefe (Martin, Brian & O'Keefe, 1973). I'll probably never become Australia's Robertson Davies.

But if Susan Wood keeps up the good work, I may yet become the possessor of the best collection of Robertson Davies's work in Australia. Noting how much I enjoyed *Samuel Marchbanks' Almanack* and *Fifth Business* last winter, Susan has kindly sent me *The Manticore* (one of two sequels to *Fifth Business* — and I apologize here and now for not believing there could be a sequel), *A Mixture of Frailties*, *Leaven of Malice* and *A Voice from the Attic* (a book about reading books: lovely stuff, even if the man seems as oblivious to poetry as I am to theatre). It looks like being a good winter again. Bless you, Susan!

'Now, the beer sour in his stomach, he was standing in it watching, and for the past half-hour he'd been constantly on his radio.' (William Haggard, *A Cool Day for Killing*, p.43) Pretty messy, these alcoholics. I'd hate to be an alcoholic. Just half an hour ago my doctor said to me 'You know, technically you are an alcoholic.' It's scary. Here I've been convinced that I'm a prime candidate for a stroke, a heart attack or lung cancer, and all the time I've been working up to cirrhosis of the liver. Amazing: the good doctor waits until my cholesterol level is almost down to normal, triglyceride level down 35%, weight down by 8 pounds since Easter — then tells me I have a liver malfunction. When that goes away, it'll be back to lung cancer, I just know it: he's like that. I'd better not tell him the one about old fans decomposing on stencil, in case he makes me give that up, too.

# AUSTRALIAN POSTAGE RECKONER

Supplement to Stunned Mullet 7 for ANZAPA

Don't take my word for any of this. Ask your post office for a copy of the 'Rates of Postage ready reckoner' and check. Outside Adelaide you'll need it anyway to adjust the column headings for surface parcels. Note that my figures are based on sheets, not pages, and the sheets are standard 67gsm quarto duplicating paper. There is a little margin for error, but for A4 paper you must add 12.5% to your sheet total, and for paper heavier than 67gsm you must add the appropriate percentage, in order to convert to my sheet numbers.

PRINTED PAPERS,	Mass Sheets	Australia	Overseas						
SURFACE,									
AUSTRALIA AND	TQ: 50g	12	.20						.20
OVERSEAS	100	25	.30						.30
	250	62	.40						.45
<i>Australian parcel</i>	500	125	.60						.80
<i>rate starts at</i>				Adel	SA	Melb	Vic	Tas	USA
<i>500g. Overseas</i>						Syd	NSW	Qld	UK
<i>parcel rate</i>						ACT		WA	Can &c
<i>starts at 2kg.</i>									
<i>Overseas book</i>	1kg	250	.75	1.10	1.70	2.00	2.25	2.15	2.15
<i>rate (2-5kg)</i>	2	500	.80	1.15	1.95	2.25	2.70	2.80	2.80
<i>is \$2.80 plus</i>	3	750	.85	1.20	2.20	2.50	3.15	3.50	4.70
<i>65¢ per kg.</i>	4	1000	.90	1.25	2.45	2.75	3.60	4.00	5.60
	5	1250	.95	1.30	2.70	3.00	4.05	4.50	6.50

Note: The object of this exercise is to show the occasional advantage of sending material in more than one parcel - e.g. 600g costs \$1.70 from Adelaide to Melbourne, \$2.15 overseas, \$2.25 to Hobart; 500g+100g costs 90¢ in Australia, \$1.10 overseas. Don't be scared to take your stuff to a post office with two envelopes (or whatever) and work out your cheapest way of sending it on their scales.

## SURFACE, AIR-LIFTED (SAL)

Available only to UK, USA, Italy, Greece, West Germany (NOT Canada)

250g	62	1.80	1.75kg	438	6.60	3.25kg	812	11.40
500	125	2.60	2	500	7.40	3.5	875	12.20
750	187	3.40	2.25	562	8.20	3.75	938	13.00
1kg	250	4.20	2.5	625	9.00	4	1000	13.80
1.25	312	5.00	2.75	687	9.80	4.25	1062	14.60
1.5	375	5.80	3	750	10.60	4.5	1125	15.40

## AIRMAIL, OVERSEAS

Australian rates are complex: see PO reckoner. I'm not sure whether there is a limit on overseas 'printed papers'; in case there isn't I have noted the practical limit, above which parcel rate is cheaper.

NEW ZEALAND	Printed papers (to 400g):	40¢ per 50g	Letters:
	Parcels:	\$2 + 70¢ per 250g	.25 per 10g
USA/CANADA	Printed papers (to 250g):	70¢ per 50g	.40 to 50g,
	Parcels:	\$2 + \$1.90 per 250g	per 20g
UK/EUROPE	Printed papers (to 250g):	75¢ per 50g	.45 over 50g
	Parcels:	\$2 + \$2.20 per 250g	

Correct at 13.5.1977, E60E