
Flann O'Brien's Creative Loophole

Germán Asensio

University of Almería, Spain

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Abstract. Flann O'Brien (1911-1966) began his career as a novelist in 1939 with the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Since then, his first novel has generally been considered by far his finest work. In 1940, O'Brien's second novel, *The Third Policeman*, was rejected by several publishers and O'Brien temporarily ceased to write novels. He devoted twenty-one years to writing his long-running newspaper column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, apart from several theatre and TV plays. In 1961 he began to write novels again with the publication of *The Hard Life* and three years later, in 1964, he published *The Dalkey Archive*. Although his last two novels enjoyed positive reception, for many years critics and audience alike have thought that they could not be compared to *At Swim-Two-Birds*. It has been argued that O'Brien started to lose his creativity as a writer from the 1940s onwards due to a number of reasons. This article aims at assessing the question of creativity in Flann O'Brien and at trying to provide some answers by looking at several external and personal circumstances in his career as a writer.

Key Words. Flann O'Brien, Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s, Politics, Post-independence Ireland, James Joyce, Sean O'Faolain, Patrick Kavanagh.

Resumen. Flann O'Brien (1911-1966) comenzó su carrera como novelista en 1939 con la publicación de *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Desde entonces, su primera novela ha sido generalmente considerada como su mejor obra. En 1940, su segunda novela, *The Third Policeman*, fue rechazada por varias editoriales y, en consecuencia, O'Brien dejó de escribir novelas temporalmente. Dedicó veintiún años a escribir su prolongada columna titulada *Cruiskeen Lawn*, además de varias obras de teatro y televisión. En 1961, comenzó a escribir novelas de nuevo con la publicación de *The Hard Life*, y tres años después, en 1964, publicó *The Dalkey Archive*. Aunque sus dos últimas novelas gozaron de una recepción positiva, durante muchos años tanto la crítica como su audiencia han pensado que estas dos novelas no podían compararse con *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Se ha mantenido que O'Brien comenzó a perder creatividad como escritor desde los años 40 en adelante debido a diversas razones. El propósito de este artículo es analizar la cuestión de la creatividad en Flann O'Brien e intentar ofrecer algunas respuestas a través del estudio de varias circunstancias externas y personales en su carrera como escritor.

Palabras Clave. Flann O'Brien, Irlanda en los años 40 y 50, Irlanda tras la independencia, James Joyce, Sean O'Faolain, Patrick Kavanagh.

Introduction

When Flann O'Brien's first novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* was published on 13th March 1939, it was immediately hailed as a work of genius. Admired by a long list of eminent personalities, among whom James Joyce topped the list for decades, it has been widely considered as O'Brien's

finest literary creation along with *The Third Policeman*, written in 1940 and posthumously published in 1967. He also published *The Poor Mouth* (1941, originally in Irish and entitled *An Béal Bocht*), *The Hard Life* (1961), and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), the latter being a rewriting of *The Third Policeman* with certain

modifications and additions. Both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* have been constant objects of study and research due to their innovative, early-postmodernist experimentation; perhaps even *The Poor Mouth* could fit into that category¹ given its politically idiosyncratic content which has attracted many commentators interested in the Irish nationalist movement during the 1940s. However, neither the rest of his novels nor his vast, long-running column entitled *Cruiskeen Lawn*, published almost daily from 1940 to 1966, have received sufficient critical appraisal compared to O'Brien's main novels.² Whereas *At Swim-Two-Birds* takes modernism to its limit through metafiction, exploring the intricacies of fiction and redefining the concept through the narration of an undergraduate Dublin student and novice writer, *The Third Policeman* molds them into postmodernism through "fragmentation and indeterminacy" (Hopper 2011: 13). Be that as it may, in the case of these two novels it seems that O'Brien's imaginative

engine was working at maximum speed, whereas *The Hard Life*, succinctly introduced as "O'Brien's most normal picture of reality" (Clissman 1975: 272) or *The Dalkey Archive* seem to take a step backwards to certainly still comic, but allegedly inferior realism.

Just a few years after the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, many readers were claiming that this novel would remain as O'Brien's best work ever and that *Cruiskeen Lawn*, a project which O'Brien – under the pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen – was so intently committed to, had done nothing but to cut a brilliant and promising literary career short; not to mention the consideration of *The Poor Mouth* as being nothing but an empty satirical attack towards Irish language revival, thus lacking on artistic worth (Cronin 1990: 179). This issue has been a frequent source of doubt among scholars: why are *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman* so avowedly brilliant compared to the rest of his output? Moreover, what are the reasons for this apparent loss of effervescence in his writing in later years? It is indeed not possible to address the problem in a straightforward way. There were many reasons for this apparent creative decline: personal and financial problems, official obstacles and social and cultural interventions. I contend, however, that one of the facts that might have caused O'Brien's fertile imagination to fall into disuse lies at the state of culture at that time in Ireland:³ it was an essentially provincial country whose political determination to forge a culture and ideology of its own was not everybody's cup of tea – indeed, it was not O'Brien's –, and on top of that there were the typical problems that an Irish writer had to struggle with, such as censorship or a still illiterate audience. Ireland, a country whose recently achieved absolute independence – by means of the Constitution of 1937 – was put into test by World War II, did actually flourish in terms of artistic and intellectual development

1. *The Poor Mouth* has been often compared to what has been considered its counterpart in depicting Gaelic standards during the first half of the century, Tomas O'Crohan's *An t-Oileánach (The Islandman)*, 1928). What is interesting is that while O'Crohan's novel has been mainly encapsulated into the category of realism, *The Poor Mouth* goes one step further and fits into comedy and satire (Cronin 1990: 143). The decrease of O'Brien's originality parallels his shift from fantasy, modernism and outrageousness towards a kind of provincial realism.

2. In recent years, however, many O'Brien's scholars have devoted further attention to the rest of his output. Both *'Is it about a bicycle?' Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century* (2011), a collection of essays edited by Jennika Baines and *The Review of Contemporary Fiction. Flann O'Brien: Centenary Essays* (2011), edited by Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper contain contributions which examine *Cruiskeen Lawn* in depth as well as *The Hard Life*, *The Poor Mouth* or O'Brien's television writing. *Flann O'Brien: Contesting Legacies* (2014), edited by Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan and Werner Huber, is another collection of essays which engages with O'Brien's unattended writing pieces such as his short fiction and plays. Additionally, Maebh Long's *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (2014) focuses also on works such as *The Hard Life*, *The Dalkey Archive*, *The Poor Mouth* or the *Cruiskeen Lawn* production

3. Constanza del Río's article "An Irish Writer in Distress: The Case of Flann O'Brien" (1999) also touches on the issue, saying that "Flann O'Brien's fate as an experimental dissenting writer in the first decades of the post-independence Ireland [...] illustrates the paralyzing forces dominating cultural, political and social Irish life" (344).

during the conflict. Many important literary figures did their finest work during this time, such as Sean O’Faolain, Frank O’Connor, Elizabeth Bowen or Patrick Kavanagh. Why, then, given this impressively fertile literary background, did O’Brien’s literary achievements seem to be moving backwards instead of forwards? This article will try to shed some light on the issue by following O’Brien’s literary career starting at the 1930s with his university years and the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, going all the way through his literary activities during the 1940s and 1950s, and ending up with his two last published novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, taking special interest on the cultural atmosphere which impregnated those decades and how it could have affected O’Brien’s creativity.

Flann O’Brien and the Question of Creativity

The fact that O’Brien enrolled at University College Dublin (henceforth UCD) at the time he did, 1929, is essential in assessing Flann O’Brien’s future issues with creativity. The thick literary atmosphere shrouding UCD back then, mainly spread by its former student James Joyce, inevitably got to O’Brien. Although *Ulysses* had been banned, some students – O’Brien included – managed to get their hands on the text and were distributing it among their eager friends. Most of them were also anxious about the upcoming *Work in Progress*, to be later on entitled *Finnegans Wake*. Anthony Cronin recounts that “[it] is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Joyce in their view of things. Naturally enough, given the time, they were self-conscious modernists; and Joyce was the great, native Irish, Catholic – or, at least, Catholic-minded – modern” (1990: 54). From admiration stemmed an unavoidable desire for imitation and this necessarily favored O’Brien’s longing for becoming a successful writer. This set up a regular habit of gathering with his friends in pubs mostly during class hours to discuss literature, usually under the effects of alcohol. Not only that, but he also started contributing to a university journal called *Comhthrom Féinne*, edited by his lifelong friend Niall Sheridan. Soon, his creative potential gave proof of its existence, so much so that his early pieces suffered, as Cronin shows, from what his later novels would

not, censorship: “Sheridan was summoned before the President of the College, Dr Denis Coffey [...], to answer a charge of having published obscene matter in a College magazine which was supported by the College authorities” (1990: 59). This, along with the publication in 1934 of the brilliant short story “Scenes in a Novel” in the aforementioned journal, pointed to a successful literary career which would begin with *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

Even before the publication of his first novel, however, things began to take a turn for the worse. After college, Flann O’Brien, his brother Ciarán and Niall Sheridan decided to create a new literary journal called *Blather*. At first, it did actually follow the line of *Comhthrom Féinne* and started to forge the ideas that O’Brien would later develop in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, but they soon put an end to the journal because it did not sell because the editors did not advertise it properly. Composing *At Swim-Two-Birds* was painful for him and towards the closing stages of his writing he confessed to his friend Sheridan that he was “sick of it” (Cronin 1990: 94). Indeed, his disdain towards his own creation lasted longer than one may imagine. Aidan Higgins, recounting a meeting with O’Brien in which he professed his admiration for *At Swim-Two-Birds*, admits that he was “not aware of how much he detested the novel, or its fame. He felt about it rather as Yeats felt about “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, or Becket felt about *Murphy*: he *abominated* it” (Higgins 2011: 29). Not only himself, but also his relatives “didn’t approve of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which seemed to hold the family up to derision” (2011: 31). At this time, like any respectable literary figure of relevance, Flann O’Brien had begun to hang out at the Palace Bar, a place managed by Bertie Smyllie, the then-editor of *The Irish Times*, where some of Dublin intelligentsia tended to gather together and discuss literature and other cultural matters. Although it seemed to be a tasteful atmosphere for writers and intellectuals of different persuasions, Charles Travis marks, through a recollection of Patrick Kavanagh’s impressions of the place, that “[t]he volatile mix of intellects, critics, writers made for a social cocktail that was prone to mediocrity and occasional combustibility” (2005: 214). It can be seen then that actually it was not a healthy atmosphere for O’Brien and

his creativity to grow fertile despite the intellectual background. Moreover, around that time, he had received feedback from Longmans regarding the publication of the recently completed *The Third Policeman*. Unfortunately, the publishing house considered that despite O'Brien's potential, he should become "less fantastic and in this new novel he is more so" (Cronin 1990: 111). During the period before and after the publishing enquiries about *The Third Policeman* he seemed to be on low spirits and "his inner uncertainties were great and he was always oddly in need of reassurance about anything he wrote" (1990: 111). We can only interpret these events as the beginning of O'Brien's creative downfall. *At Swim-Two-Birds*, six months following its publication, had just sold 244 copies before Longmans' London warehouse was destroyed by German bombs, rendering most of his novel's copies unobtainable.

The government's decision to stay neutral during World War II – period known as "The Emergency" in Ireland – was almost thoroughly welcome among the Irish people although it manifested itself in a sense of passivity among the citizens, a sense that what was happening in Europe would hardly affect them despite intermittent shortages of several goods. In writing, however, "The Emergency" fuelled an outburst of intellectual activity which a cultural and literary magazine, *The Bell* – edited by Sean O'Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell and appearing monthly from 1940 until 1954 –, mainly encapsulated. The magazine was intended to gather within its pages a series of brilliant personalities, especially literati, which could be able to expose and improve Ireland's cultural condition during that period. In fact, Cronin asserts that he "can't describe [...] how rare, or rare-seeming sophistication was in De Valera's Ireland as it tottered towards the end of The Emergency" (1983: 38). The following lines may summarize the situation in which *The Bell* was begotten:

Life in Ireland at the time was in O'Faolain's words 'pretty deadly dull'. The war in Europe, neutrality with its isolation and twinges of guilt, the growing-pains of an eighteen-year old state, De Valera's vision of Ireland as part kibbutz and part Christian Tara, all led to a general dispiritedness and O'Faolain's hope was that *The Bell* would play some part in jazzing up the sluggish life of the country (McMahon 1983: 10

The Bell aimed at calling upon "the small-town intellectual, hungry for mental stimulus, and undoubtedly it was with such that it must have had its greatest influence" (Brown 1981: 203). However, Sean O'Faolain's first editorial entitled "This is your Magazine" closes with some final remarks which are relevant: "We ban only lunatics and sour-bellies. We are absolutely inclusive. [...] Whoever you are, O reader, Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, priest or layman, Big House or Small House – *The Bell* is yours" (1983: 16). Thus, *The Bell* was also geared to many other collectives making it the perfect place for O'Brien to bloom as a writer. And indeed, he did actually contribute with a few articles⁴ to early issues, but soon after that he just decided to direct his energies to the daily writing of *Cruiskeen Lawn* and towards the composition of *The Poor Mouth*. *The Bell* remained a fertile land in which O'Brien could have flourished among widely known names such as O'Faolain and the rest of the contributors to the journal. The fact that he decided not to follow the line of this group of intellectuals proves again that as early as the beginning of the 1940s O'Brien had decided to embark on an individual path waiting to reap the promising fruits that *The Poor Mouth* or *Cruiskeen Lawn* might have produced.

Another issue that set O'Brien against the cultural state of his country during the 1940s was the recurrent Celtic Revival encouraged by the officialdom. The creation of the new state necessarily implied some change in the mentality of its inhabitants. De Valera was intelligent enough to understand that art could become a major vehicle of ideological transmission. Although he maintained the strictness of the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929 (which was to be modified in 1946), he encouraged people to look at art as a mirror in order to feel compelled to represent De Valera's ideal vision of Ireland rooted in ancient Gaelic times and in the worship of peasantry. Terence Brown's thoughts on this matter are relevant to quote:

[T]he period since independence had seen a kind

4. Such as "The Dance Halls" (February 1941) included in the anthology *Great Irish Writing: The Best from The Bell* (1983, ed. Sean McMahon) or "The Trade in Dublin" (November 1940).

of *putsch* which had brought an intellectually and culturally impoverished middle class into power. This ruling élite had innured itself against an awareness of the dismal facts of Ireland's social reality as a nation but newly formed in the nineteenth century, and as yet lacking in many of the appurtenances of civilization, in dreams of the Gaelic past, the noble peasant, the seamless garment of Irish history and culture (1981: 200-201).

These were nothing but idealized and romanticized visions of Ireland which *Gaeligores* and extremist Gaelic supporters shared, being therefore unable or unwilling to perceive the reality of the country. Most of the Irish intellectuals of the time, especially Sean O'Faolain as a leading figure and O'Brien itself in *Cruiskeen Lawn* and *The Poor Mouth*, had set themselves against this kind of ideology. O'Brien felt that the then-contemporary situation of literature in Ireland and how it was interpreted by the public was a very distasteful issue. He wrote a column entitled "Literary Criticism", its main function throughout being to expose the inconsistencies of Dublin's literary panorama during the 1940s. He began by attacking some of his contemporary Irish writers in the following way:

Our writers, fascinated by the snake-like eye of London publishers, have developed exhibitionism to the sphere of acrobatics. Convulsions and contortions foul and masochistic have been passing for literature in this country for too long. Playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy, pretending to be morose and obsessed and thoughtful – all that is wearing so thin that we must put it aside soon in shame as one puts aside a threadbare suit (1993: 234).⁵

These lines are obviously addressed to those writers who were at the service of the Gaelic Revival or, failing this, those who served the purposes of De Valera's ambitious social restoration of Celtic values. The two most prominent writers who followed this line were, of course, Yeats and Synge. Cronin highlights that he did not "display much interest in Celtic twilightery. He was positively hostile to Synge

5. Extracts from O'Brien's columns lack their original date of publication given that they are quoted from Kevin O'Nolan's compilation *The Best of Myles* (1993), where the actual dates are missing.

and even, it seems, somewhat indifferent to Yeats" (1990: 63). In fact, in the same "Literary Criticism" column, he gives proof several times of his disdain towards Synge:

But when the counterfeit bauble began to be admired outside Ireland by reason of its oddity and "charm", it soon became part of the literary credo here that Synge was a poet and a wild celtic god, a bit of genius, indeed, like the brother. We, who knew the whole insideouts of it, preferred to accept the ignorant valuations of outsiders on things Irish. And now the curse has come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge's plays. They talk and dress like that, and damn the drink they'll swally but the mug of porter in the long nights after Samhain (O'Brien 1993: 235).

He even thinks that "nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable to Synge" (1993: 234). What the figure of Synge represented in literary Ireland was certainly important. He had been the co-founder of the Abbey theatre, along with Yeats, and had contributed to establish an "Irish" literary pattern. But neither Synge, nor the emerging realist school of Frank O'Connor and even Sean O'Faolain pleased him. I contend that what O'Brien actually abhorred of those writers was their profound localism, their use of realism⁶ to depict the provincial reality of Ireland indirectly resulting in an outwardly unsophisticated image. This might have also been one of the causes of O'Brien's first inclination towards fantasy and modernism. Moreover, "[h]is gods and the gods of his friends were the gods of the time, big and little: Eliot, Joyce, Aldous Huxley and to depict the provincial reality of Ireland indirectly resulting in an outwardly unsophisticated image. This might have also been one of the causes of O'Brien's first inclination towards fantasy and modernism. Moreover, "[h]is gods and the gods of his friends were the gods of the time, big and little: Eliot, Joyce, Aldous Huxley and Hemmingway" (Cronin 1990). Most of the intellectual

6. Constanza del Río claims that "[r]ealism and naturalism became the officially favoured representational modes, the ones able to capture and articulate the unheroic and parochial discourses, images and myths of the new state" (1999: 336). The realist tendency from the 1940s onwards that affected O'Brien so deeply seems to have also been politically motivated.

figures of the beginning of the 1940s were harboring a discourse O'Brien did not identify himself with." (Cronin 1990). Most of the intellectual figures of the beginning of the 1940s were harboring a discourse O'Brien did not identify himself with. This fact might have contributed to O'Brien's disenchantment along the years.⁷

From the 1940s on, however, the public had become an important part of the picture. If the government had, at first, approved individual and specialized artistic visions such as Yeats' which could contribute in some way to the edification – in terms of identity – of the state, then there was a "shift from the culture of the literary coterie [...] towards aspirations for more popular involvement in the arts" (Taaffe 2011: 112). O'Brien devoted many columns in *Cruiskeen Lawn* to deconstruct the stupidity and nonsense of many popular pretensions on this regard. The "Waama, etc" columns are a series of fierce satirical attacks on the people of Dublin whose want of sophistication was so anxious that they were prone to self-ridicule. This fictional "Waama" is supposed to stand for the Irish Writers, Actors, Artists, Musicians Association and aims at representing this percentage of pretentious intellectual people. When he is discussing the aims of the organization, he remarks the following:

Also, having regard to the categories mentioned, membership seems to be open to every man, woman and child in Ireland. Even my wife could claim to be a "commentator" (whatever they mean by that word) and everybody knows that all these organisations are really formed in order

7. Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet (2014: 4) draw an interesting parallel to illustrate the situation: "The opposition between the international modernists and the *völkish*, insular Irish revivalists, against whom they set their teeth and aimed their scorn, often calcified into a reductive duality between Joyce the pioneering modernist and Yeats the belated romanticist. It was a powerfully Manichean way of understanding Irish literary history that tended to marginalize a figure like O'Brien from the institutions of literary studies: experimental and open to European currents, scornful of the myths and pieties of the Irish Revival, but at the same time domiciled in Dublin, and profoundly attuned to the local and provincial dimensions of Irish life".

to give people a pretext for getting away from their families. So what's the use? (O'Brien 1993: 16).

Everybody was allowed to become a member of "Waama". The association, therefore, becomes something public rather than exclusive as in artistic associations. "Waama" was nothing but an ironic chimera whose only function was to encompass that increasingly vast amount of unintellectual people who were approaching art just for the sake of social privilege. Therefore, many newly initiated readers found the literary atmosphere of Dublin arid as regards to their tastes. Taaffe poses that "by the 1940s, relations between Irish writers and their public were also souring as never before" (2011: 112). O'Brien's position at the time was certainly delicate: most of his contemporaries – Patrick Kavanagh, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor, among others – mainly followed a realistic line far from the inventive and eruditely comic *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. As Keith Hopper states, "O'Brien [...] detested this complacent kind of realism, believing it to be sentimental and anachronistic" (2011: 23). *At Swim-Two-Birds* had not sold many copies and *The Third Policeman* had been rejected – it is thus logical that O'Brien turned its back on fiction and focused himself on journalism.

According to Declan Kiberd, the persona of Myles na gCopaleen⁸ "offered his author the quick success and laughs which hold a deadly attraction for the Irish artist who knows he should express, but fears he may have to exploit, his material" (1996: 512). The moment he decided to contribute to *The Irish Times* with *Cruiskeen Lawn* may be as well seen as a watershed in O'Brien's creative career. *Cruiskeen Lawn* implied a shift from "purely"

8. The name "Myles na gCopaleen" has its own story. It comes firstly from a character in Gerald Griffin's novel *The Collegians* (1829) which was later to be successfully adapted to a play called *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), by Dion Boucicault. Myles na gCopalín is a character in the play who fulfills the role of the stage Irishman. "Myles na gCopaleen" can be translated to English as "Myles of the Little Horses" although O'Brien preferred "Myles of the Ponies" so as to contrast the independent figure of the pony with the authoritative horse in order to point at "Ireland's self-conscious attempts to emerge from England's shadow" (MacNamara 2012: 33).

literary forms such as the novel, the short story or the play, to “minor” typologies such as journalism and at the same time it meant a stepping down from the discourse of modernity. It necessarily brought over a slight modification of his own mockingly erudite style towards something closer to the discourse of “The Plain People of Ireland”.⁹ This has been noted by Joseph Brooker, who argues that most scholars have approached the column as “a distraction from the real business of writing, a diversion of artistic energy into mere ephemera” (2005: 87). However, some authors argue just the contrary. Others, however, have insisted on the hidden qualities of the prose of his press columns, revealing a subversive writer even in such a prosaic medium. This is the case of Flore Coulouma, who poses the following:

In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Myles, The Brother’s brother, Keats and Chapman and The Plain People of Ireland all tell us stories directly and perform a representation of storytelling. This raises a number of questions concerning the narrative structure of *Cruiskeen Lawn*: its linguistic status of ironical stance, its ambiguous relation between orality and the written work, and the importance of dialogic and polyphonic discourse (2011: 164).

Following Coulouma, other critics have acknowledged *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s worth among O’Brien’s oeuvre. Keith Hopper highlights the importance of Myles’ ideas on literature and language (2011: 31) and Jon Day wonders whether “O’Nolan’s major work, far from being prevented by the column, was in plain view all along, in the pages of the *Irish Times*” (2011: 33). Other scholars, such as Stephen Young, argue that a shift from novelistic or dramatic production towards journalism or a decreasing ironic tone over the years do not necessarily imply a consubstantial absence of quality (1997: 112). Therefore, the assumption

that O’Brien’s loss of creative potential was due to his involvement with *Cruiskeen Lawn* lacks solid ground to stand on.

The final years of the 1940s and the decade of the 1950s are perhaps fundamental proof of O’Brien’s creative problems. In fact, by 1941 he had written three of the most important landmarks of Irish modernism and post-modernism and had received very little reward for them, either monetary or in terms of personal admiration. Keith Hopper warns that this fact “would adversely affect the quality of his later work” (2000: 121). After all, since 1941, with *An Béal Bocht*, he had not published any kind of serious narrative work. He contributed to issues of *Envoy* with short stories such as “The Martyr’s Crown” and “Two in One” – the latter being adapted for a fairly successful teleplay¹⁰ – but he did not overtake the task of writing a novel which could be equal in brilliance to *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *The Third Policeman*. The years of “The Emergency” had been prolific for *Cruiskeen Lawn* because that was the period in which most of his mockery of Gaelicism was produced. The following years were seemingly devoted to fulfilling his increasingly political duty as a civil servant as best as he could and to writing the column; though, by then, drinking had moved from being a mere friendly pastime after college or work to become a severe problem. Immediately after the post-war period O’Brien began to hang out at different places to have a sporadic drink. One of them was the Scotch House, “which was near enough to the office for him to nip out for several quick ones drunk slowly during working hours; and this he was increasingly beginning to do” (Cronin 1990: 167). There is an interesting event that Cronin recounts which allows for a better understanding of what was O’Brien’s situation at the time:

9. “The Plain People of Ireland” was a series of successful columns within *Cruiskeen Lawn* in which he engaged in conversations and discussions with members of the so-called “Plain People of Ireland”. These were normally peasants, uncultivated people and the columns are usually built upon dialogues between “Myself” (which is Myles) and “The Plain People of Ireland”. Most of the times, the latter are depicted trying to outwit Myles whereby he, by means of an ostentatious language, answers them.

10. The teleplay was to be called *The Dead Spirit of Kelly*, broadcast in 1962. It is interesting to notice how O’Brien felt the need to recycle one of his most appraised short stories at the time. Curiously enough, it was broadcast the same year *The Hard Life*, his best acclaimed novel, was published. This is additional proof supporting the argument that O’Brien was struggling during the early 1960s to find a creative way out.

During this period of enthusiasm for rugby, Douglas Gageby, then just out of the Irish Army and working on the *Sunday Press*, used to go into the Scotch House at 11.00 or 11.30 in the morning with a colleague, Dick Wilkes. In the large upstairs lounge there almost every morning they would see Brian O’Nolan, or Myles as they soon began to call him. He was nearly always alone [...]. They soon got to know and like Myles and they formed the distinct impression that he was an enthusiast for the game of rugby; so much so that when an international match was in prospect Wilkes had the bright idea of asking him to write a piece about it for the sports pages of the *Sunday Press* [...]. When they got back to the *Sunday Press* office at 5.00 Brian sat down at the typewriter; but after half an hour or so it was clear to Wilkes that nothing printable was going to result and so the substitute piece was used instead (1990: 168-169).

Although drinking was not the main problem affecting O’Brien’s creativity and did not necessarily prevent him from writing – he continued writing *Cruiskeen Lawn* for more than a decade and a half almost daily, most of the times after having a few drinks – it did actually play a pivotal role in decreasing his spontaneity. The incident that Cronin narrates might be just an example among many instances¹¹ in which extreme intoxication became an obstacle for his writing. This rather gloomy section in O’Brien’s biography has been surprisingly overlooked by many scholars.¹² It has become almost a generalized axiom that O’Brien became an alcoholic around this time though nobody but his biographer has attempted to consider the causes. The fact whether O’Brien was literarily affected by drinking cannot be addressed directly because it

11. Another event of importance regarding O’Brien’s drinking habits is recorded by Cronin (1990: 183-184) when, in the early 1950s, he was taken to court for driving under the influence of alcohol. Although the court threw the charges out, it would set up a sort of pattern which was to be repeated multiple times throughout the decade.

12. An article entitled “No Unauthorized Boozing’: Flann O’Brien and the Thirsty Muse” by Sam Dickinson has been recently published within the collection of essays *Flann O’Brien & Modernism* (2014) in which the author draws a rather interesting parallel between O’Brien’s biographical and fictional drinking patterns and habits focusing, however, especially on the latter.

might have been a positive influence in some cases. Sam Dickinson asserts that O’Brien’s position towards drinking “is ambivalent, at once offering a fecund source of inspiration, particularly in its invocation of the non-rational, and also recognizing that such advantages are fleeting. The spatiotemporal warping of intoxication inevitably yields to a sobering return into the inescapable limitations of material conditions” (2014: 165). It might be argued that drinking moved from being an influence during O’Brien’s earlier writing days (his UCD period with *Comhthrom Féinne*, the editorship of his own short-lived magazine *Blather*, the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* the early days of *Cruiskeen Lawn*) to becoming a real problem affecting his own inspiration. John Wyse Jackson implies that in the 1950s both drinking and his (and also Patrick Kavanagh’s) personal economic situation contributed to a decrease in his creativity:

The sorry chronicle of these two writers in the 1950s is dominated by the twin devils of drink and poverty. A good deal of what they managed to earn during these years was spent on alcohol and related activities; accordingly, many of their ideas and much of their literary output were driven by a desperate need to earn more. A catalogue of the failed schemes that were floated by each of them would be a long one. Few of their ideas came to anything at all, and even the more successful ones brought in very little cash (2014: 14).

His attitude towards writing began to change over this period, where he moved from being merely a humorist to becoming a fierce satirist: José Lanterns argues that his *Cruiskeen Lawn* writing “is no longer inventive and constructive, but vindictive, destructing and decreasing” (1987: 180) although he concedes that “it is naturally impossible to indicate a clear “break” in the nature of the writing, a moment where nonsense stops and something else begins. The process is a gradual one, and the difference one detects is a matter of degree, of emphasis on different forms of humour” (1987: 181). He adopted a different perspective towards the then stereotypical concept of the artist, a view which had long moved away from the influence of Joyce during his youth but that seemed to retain some aspects of it. In fact, he contributed with a remarkable article on this

topic to *Kavanagh's Weekly*¹³ in 1952:

What do you think I think of *Kavanagh's Weekly*?

It's not bad at all. It must change, of course. The cloying iterance about the function of the artist in society will have to stop. Your shirt maker or motor assembler asserts his existence by the formation of some sort of plant, however back the backlane of its location. Your artist of to-day proclaims his arrival by documents attested by his personal sign-manual. He is his own boss. He himself says he is here. His is one of the unpleasant statements of our day that cannot be doubted. He is here all right (O'Brien 2014: 6).

The figure of the artist seemed to have acquired a social function which O'Brien clearly disapproved of. As Joyce, O'Brien seems to propose here an artistic paradigm in which the artist is somebody who is apart from society, devoted only to his art, bound to break with any ties that dragged him down. However, O'Brien takes this ideal further to the point that the nature of his writing lost a reflective and creative undertone and became what Lanterns claimed above: an essentially destructive writer whose purpose was to expose in a rash satirical way the inconsistencies of the society he was living in, turning the vision of a socially committed writer into just the contrary. The connection to Joyce is drawn because, after all, it was a year after he co-edited a special edition of *Envoy* dedicated exclusively to Joyce, where he wrote a famous piece entitled 'A Bash in the Tunnel'. It was to be, apart from a few columns in *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the main piece of critical nature which he published regarding Joyce, and, though he was not especially aggressive towards him, O'Brien proclaimed that "the true fascination of Joyce lies in his secretiveness, his ambiguity (his polyguity perhaps?), his leg-pulling, his dishonesties, his technical skill, his attraction for Americans" (In Cronin 1990: 190). This proves that O'Brien's apparent attachment to Joyce as seen by the critics was not so strong – something that O'Brien earnestly

13. Patrick Kavanagh and his brother Peter edited *Kavanagh's Weekly: A Journal of Literature and Politics* between April and July 1952. The journal published several pieces by O'Brien – under the Myles na gCopaleen penname – which have been recently republished in the latest issue of *The Parish Review* (Spring 2014).

managed to clarify –, but also that he did not dislike him as much as he intended people to believe. In fact, in 1954, he took part – along with John Ryan, Patrick Kavanagh, Tom Joyce and Anthony Cronin – in the first Bloomsday.

Apart from all that, it was not an easy time for any writer in Ireland. The brilliant post-war days of *The Bell* and all the literary effervescence that Dublin harbored had long extinguished. Although O'Brien was not a victim of it,¹⁴ censorship had become a dangerous obstacle in the path of many Irish writers since the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). Diarmaid Ferriter argues that censorship "made a mockery of plans to bring books to the people; a cultivated taste for civilized reading was [...] for an entire generation rejected by a conspiracy of closed minds" (Ferriter 2005: 528). Also, literature was not a priority nor a focalized element in Irish culture; society was paying more attention to economic and social problems, mainly the effects of massive migration. The situation for writers had changed and there was "no wholesale embracing of 'quality literature'. Nonetheless, there was much reading of newspapers – Dublin alone had three evening newspapers in the 1950s" (2005: 528). This might serve as an explanation as to why O'Brien did not publish anything of relevance during this decade except for his *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns, which were turning more satirical and harsher than ever. Many authors complained about the increasingly degenerating situation of literature and arts back then. One of the most well-known claims at the time was that of Sean O'Faolain in *The Bell*. He wrote an editorial entitled "Signing Off" in April 1946, just after the war, where it is implied that he had started to feel the post-war effects on Irish literature and culture: "We could not, and nobody

14. Keith Hopper (2011: 52) has proved that, though O'Brien had never had a work censored, he "actively sought" it. According to Hopper, O'Brien did this for reputation purposes. Every great writer in Ireland had suffered from censorship at least once, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, and O'Brien did actually want to reach that cult status. With *The Hard Life*, although exempt of any element susceptible for censorship, O'Brien expected to achieve it but his efforts were eventually fruitless.

could, or can, produce a purely literary or artistic magazine in Ireland to-day – a magazine as full of poetic visions of ideal life, noble theories, interesting aesthetic ideas as Yeats [...]. Yeats would not much care for this magazine (and I should not blame him), where politics and social problems intrude” (1983: 120-121). Indeed, *The Bell* ceased appearing in 1954 due to financial difficulties, after a two-year span between 1948 and 1950. Moreover, *Kavanagh's Weekly* had succumbed the same fate two years ago, four months after its first edition. In the aforementioned contribution by O'Brien to *Kavanagh's Weekly*, he asks himself at the end: “There is endless opportunity: Will *Kavanagh's Weekly* have a go? I'm afraid I must say this: It won't be let” (2014: 7). With that, he meant that what Patrick Kavanagh and his brother had intended at the beginning by editing their own journal – that is, to create a purely literary space where they would not suffer the intrusion of politics and social issues as *The Bell* did –, was not meant to be at the time. Whether O'Brien meant censorship or mere lack of artistic sources is not clear, but he certainly lets us glimpse what Diarmaid Ferriter has drily called “the true bitchiness of Dublin literary life in the 1950s” (2005: 525).

What was the result of all the previously stated disparities between O'Brien, the Irish cultural background before and after the war, and his own personal problems? It was that readers and critics alike started to consider his writing as decadent, lacking in the brilliance of younger years, insecure and considerably more serious and realistic than his previous style. This view was made public somewhat earlier, in 1947, by Thomas Hogan, who contributed a piece to *The Bell* in which he assessed O'Brien's – although the piece by Hogan was succinctly entitled “Myles na gCopaleen” – abilities and achievements as a writer up to that time. Hogan began by considering, as many had done previously, *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a likely Joycean-influenced novel, albeit remarkable and O'Brien's best work ever. Then he went on listing all the works O'Brien had written after *At Swim-Two-Birds* and describing them, finally concluding that O'Brien had left humor and comic genius long behind and had turned into a fundamentally satirical writer (Cronin 1990: 177-178). At the time, turning from

an experimental and explorative way of writing novels to an essentially satirical approach would be dangerous as far as critics were concerned. By the 1940s in Ireland, Joyce had become the aesthetic role model that every writer was expected to follow. O'Brien began – either consciously or unconsciously – partaking in this view but, as his “anxiety of influence” in relation to Joyce increased, he began to feel detached from that general critical design and sought to direct his energies towards fundamentally tackling national and local problems. It is not that satire was considered a minor form of literature, but rather that the critical attention was almost exclusively focused on more innovative tendencies. Thomas Hogan's view was, however, slightly inaccurate inasmuch as O'Brien's journalism during the early 1940s was actually far more satirical than after the war. It was during the first years of *Cruiskeen Lawn* that he adopted a resilient satirical outlook towards the Gaelic Revival and De Valera's politically motivated attempts at establishing Irish as an official primary language spoken by every Irish individual. Moreover, although Hogan's contribution was to be in line with most of O'Brien's later critics, the piece was written in 1947 and *Cruiskeen Lawn* ran with almost consistent frequency for about twenty years. Cronin, however, stresses the relevance of Hogan's article as it was destined to become the main perspective under which O'Brien was to be looked:

It propounds a view of the column as rather cantankerous and sterile which, in spite of the fact that they continued to read it, was becoming the accepted notion in such circles in the late 1940s. Although O'Nolan was still only 36 the article cruelly asserted that his best work was ‘far behind him’, and from now on, this too was to become the accepted view in the circles in which Thomas Hogan moved (1990: 179).

Perhaps because O'Brien was fully aware of the status his work was falling into, or perhaps because he felt it was time to experiment with narrative again, he wrote *The Hard Life* in 1961. He was conscious that *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a novel which he had openly detested even before its publication, was now becoming his finest literary achievement as far as critics were regarded. However, he was also mindful

of *The Third Policeman*'s rapid rejection due to its fantastic plot and perhaps that was why he decided to write *The Hard Life* in the way he did: another kind of comic *bildungsroman* starred by a parentless young boy or man living in Dublin somewhat connected to art, outwardly lacking in most of *The Third Policeman*'s fantastic and pseudo-scientific elements and *At Swim-Two-Birds*' tampering with Irish mythology. Not surprisingly, the novel enjoyed a considerably good reception in contrast with O'Brien's two earlier novels, mostly because it was not as obscure and inaccessible as both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bochtand* also because O'Brien "indulged in [his] share of the vices [he] sometimes savagely satirized" (Ferriter 2005: 524); that is, to write following a certainly realistic style, almost alien to him, which was favored by the public at that time.¹⁵ Jennika Baines has suggested that *The Hard Life*'s "dull normality has been taken as a decaying of O'Brien's abilities as a writer" (2011: 142). This decadence in his writing abilities is perhaps more visible in terms of plot rather than in terms of style. In the course of forty-one years, O'Brien's effervescent and witty language remained almost untouched, as we can see through a comparison between the openings of *The Third Policeman* and *The Hard Life*, respectively: "My mother I can recall perfectly. Her face was always red and sore-looking from bending at the fire; she spent her life making tea to pass the time and singing snatches of old songs to pass the meantime" (O'Brien 2010: 8) and:

It is not that I half knew my mother. I knew half of her: the lower half – her lap, legs, feet, her hands and wrists as she bent forward. Very dimly I seem to remember her voice. At the time, of course, I was very young. Then one day she did not seem to be there any more. So far as

15. Not surprisingly, the novel enjoyed a considerably good reception in contrast with O'Brien's two earlier novels, mostly because it was not as obscure and inaccessible as both *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht* and also because O'Brien "indulged in [his] share of the vices [he] sometimes savagely satirized" (Ferriter 2005: 524); that is, to write following a certainly realistic style, almost alien to him, which was favored by the public at that time.

I knew she had gone away without a word, no good-bye or good night. A while afterwards I asked my brother, five years my senior, where the mammy was (2011: 11).

The similitude in terms of style is evident: he even uses the same figures of speech in both cases, such as hyperbatons: "My mother I can recall perfectly" and "Very dimly I seem to remember her voice". Stylistically, his resourceful writing had been conserved; however, further problems arise from this comparison: was O'Brien's writing not as original as it was with *The Third Policeman*? The two novels open following exactly the same pattern: presenting, in a traditional way, the family background of the main character. It is true that *The Third Policeman* had not been published yet and only a few knew of its existence, but the fact that O'Brien had to resort to previously used formulas is a compelling argument to claim that, indeed, O'Brien had a creative loophole by that time. Not only that, but also the lack of wittiness and invention when developing the plots of his last two novels points towards that idea. *The Hard Life* tells the story of two brothers – Finbarr and Manus – who are raised by their half-uncle, Collopy. One of them, Manus, develops clever but outrageous business abilities from an early age, fact which results in the surrealistic and tragicomic death of Collopy at the end of the novel. Although the novel was financially successful, its plot and argument are perhaps less innovative and appealing than the fragmented, metafictional narration of *At Swim-Two-Birds* or the hidden substructure of eternal and circular hell which features *The Third Policeman*. In *The Hard Life*, both the epitaph – "All the persons in this book are real and none is fictitious even in part" – and its own narrator, of whom "we know his name, we are told some of his family history, we are familiar with his city and perhaps even his neighborhood" (Baines 2011: 148), point towards an assessment of the novel such as Lantern's:¹⁶

16. Hopper (2011: 44) follows that line of thought, pointing towards the novel's "hidden agenda – an attempt to provoke the Censorship Board into slapping a band on the book, thus earning him (he hoped) a certain regenerative notoriety". Tess Hurson (1997: 119) agrees, considering also that ·/·

“It is because *The Hard Life* consistently relies on the reader’s suspension of disbelief and, what is more important, nowhere attempts to disturb this assumption of reality by “breaking the rules”, that the book’s effect is so different from the others: it is too “real” and affects our emotions too much to be considered nonsense” (1987: 177). Nevertheless, *The Hard Life* does not necessarily need to be marginalized or disregarded within O’Brien’s output. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the novel has been undergoing recent and continuous reassessment, especially since O’Brien’s birth centenary, and still offers plenty of food for thought. For instance, Hopper sees that the novel is “really a post-colonial satire of De Valera’s Ireland (with its anti-pluralist constitution which privileged the role of the Catholic Church)” (2011: 54); Tess Hurson conjectures that “O’Brien wished to find some new vision and new mode, that he had perhaps come to think of his earlier enterprises as ambivalent or unduly rarefied” (1997: 119) or Maebh Long’s feminist approaches to the novel in her book *Assembling Flann O’Brien*. Not only that, but also the growing attention devoted to Irish Studies and, within Irish literature, to Flann O’Brien, will hopefully widen the hitherto somewhat lackluster judgments of O’Brien’s later novels.

Conclusions

This article has aimed at assessing the long-wondered question of O’Brien’s issues with creativity and his decrease of imaginative energy towards the end of his career. There are many reasons as to why O’Brien had trouble creating as easily as in his youth. The turning point can be definitely established around the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and one of the most important reasons was Ireland’s cultural and intellectual atmosphere at that time. At the beginning of the 1930s, O’Brien enjoyed a certainly widespread creative back-

·/· the novel lacks “the particular preoccupations and techniques of O’Brien’s best work” and that it “tries to take a new direction, towards a more low-keyed kind of writing, but it remains nearly always a rather makeshift production”.

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ground – despite of the influence of censorship – mainly fuelled by Joyce’s works, whose modernist experimentation and visions of Dublin fascinated most of O’Brien’s fellow writers, intellectuals and college students at the time. *Ulysses* had become a landmark work and generated a great zeal for modernism. However, not everything was a bed of roses. From 1934 onwards, O’Brien was quite unfortunate as regards his literary career, and this was mainly due to Ireland’s cultural state at the time. When he published *Blather*, a promising literary journal, it soon ceased appearance due to financial problems: people did not buy the journal for several reasons, mainly because the audience was still essentially illiterate. After that, he looked for support in intellectual groups such as the meetings at The Palace Bar or by contributing to *The Bell*. Nevertheless, there were many tensions between the literati – it was a fragmented group in which O’Brien did not seem to have the chance to flourish. Apart from that, he had received the news that *The Third Policeman* was not to be published because of its fantastic style. He had then to resort to the only viable possibility: *Cruiskeen Lawn*. While writing the column he also found many inconsonances in the Ireland he was writing about. He realized that the government’s intentions of using Gaelic as a political tool rendered the Irish language and culture a mere fashion, something that he, as a native Irish speaker, could not stand. These facts put together, along with personal problems such as excessive drinking, turned his creative potential upside-down and made him essentially satirical and destructive. The audience and the critics contributed to O’Brien’s disenchantment towards the cultural state of his country and, by the time that he decided to write novels again, it was very late: his comic spirit was still intact but the energy and creativity of his writing had vanished. He managed to publish *The Hard Life*, a hilarious novel which, however, lacked the inventiveness and imagination of *At Swim-Two-Birds*; and *The Dalkey Archive*, a rewriting of his second but unpublished novel with many structural modifications that spoiled the original idea of circularity and endless repetition.

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Germán Asensio is a research student at the University of Almería. His field of research is the Irish author Brian O'Nolan (better known as Flann O'Brien or Myles na gCopaleen) with a particular interest in his most widely known novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

About Flann O'Brien: Pseudonym of Brian Ó Nualláin, also known as Brian O'Nolan. His English novels appeared under the name of Flann O'Brien, while his Irish novels appeared under the name of Brian O'Nolan. Flann O'Brien is considered a major figure in twentieth century Irish literature. Flann O'Brien novels have attracted a wide following for their bizarre humour and Modernist metafiction. The cafe and shop of Cultúrlann McAdam Fiaich (www.culturlann.ie), at the heart of the Belfast Gaeltacht Quarter, is named An Ceathrú Páil ("The Fourth Policeman"), as a play-on-words of the title of O'Brien's book *The Third Policeman*. ...more. Combine Editions. Flann O'Brien's books. Flann O'Brien Average rating: 3.95. 35,757 ratings 3,371 reviews 43 distinct works Similar authors. The Third Police Brian O'Nolan (Irish: Brian Ó Nualláin; 5 October 1911 – 1 April 1966), better known by his pen name Flann O'Brien, was an Irish novelist, playwright and satirist, considered a major figure in twentieth century Irish literature. Born in Strabane, County Tyrone, he is regarded as a key figure in modernist and postmodern literature. His English language novels, such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, were written under the O'Brien pen name. His many satirical columns in *The Irish Times* and an *Flann O'Brien* (October 5, 1911 – April 1, 1966) is a pseudonym of the twentieth century Irish novelist and satirist Brian O'Nolan (in Irish Brian Ó Nuallain), best known for his novels *An Béal Bocht*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and *The Third Policeman*. He also wrote many satirical columns in the *Irish Times* under the name Myles na gCopaleen. O'Brien's works are considered classics of the modernist genre of metafiction. Metafiction explores the boundaries of the "real" world and the "narrated" world, usually in

Brian O'Nolan (Irish: Brian A' Nualláin; 5 October 1911 – 1 April 1966), better known by his pen name Flann O'Brien, was an Irish novelist, playwright and satirist, considered a major figure in twentieth century Irish literature. Born in Strabane, County Tyrone, he is regarded as a key figure in modernist and postmodern literature. His English language novels, such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*, were written under the O'Brien pen name. His many satirical columns in *The Irish Times* and an... Most of the humour in the novel derives from O'Brien's surreal approach to his subject matter, such as it is. The closest thing I can compare it to is listening to a drunk telling you a long and unstructured story, where no-one behaves rationally, and where he keeps forgetting what he was telling you. Occasionally glimmers of sense can be perceived, but this never lasts long and we are soon back in old Ireland, with the Pooka speculating on whether his wife is a kangaroo, or whether the invisible fairy in his pocket is planning to set it on fire. This certainly all adds up to an unusual, even unique novel. Share this: [Twitter](#). [Facebook](#). [Flann O'Brien's Creative Loophole](#). March 2015. *Estudios Irlandeses* 10(10):1-13. Flann O'Brien (1911-1966) began his career as a novelist in 1939 with the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Since then, his first novel has generally been considered by far his finest work. In 1940, O'Brien's second novel, *The Third Policeman*, was rejected by several publishers and O'Brien temporarily ceased to write novels. About Flann O'Brien: Pseudonym of Brian A' Nualláin, also known as Brian O'Nolan. His English novels appeared under the name of Flann O'Brien, while his ... Flann O'Brien is considered a major figure in twentieth century Irish literature. Flann O'Brien novels have attracted a wide following for their bizarre humour and Modernist metafiction. The café and shop of Cultúr lann McAdam A' Fiaich (www.culturlann.ie), at the heart of the Belfast Gaeltacht Quarter, is named An Ceathrú Páil ("The Fourth Policeman"), as a play-on-words of the title of O'Brien's book *The Third Policeman*. ...more. [Combine Editions](#). [Flann O'Brien's books](#). [Flann O'Brien Average rating: 3.95](#). 36,046 ratings 3,418 reviews 43 distinct works • Similar authors. [The Third Policeman](#).