

ABOUT FLANN O'BRIEN

Flann O'Brien was born in 1912. His life, like his writing, was as tragic as it was comic: comic in that the handful of books that he produced are ranked by some (including Graham Greene and Dylan Thomas) as some of the most brilliant humour ever written; tragic in that heavy drinking incapacitated him and shortened his life.

While a student at University College in Dublin, O'Brien started his own magazine, called *Blather*, announcing in its first issue: "*Blather* has no principles, no honour, no shame. We are an arrogant and a depraved body of men, as proud as bantams and as vain as peacocks".

O'Brien found work in the civil service in Dublin during the Second World War. Because he was strictly forbidden to express his opinions publicly, he resorted to writing under pen names (his own was actually Brian O'Nolan). He carried this practice to extremes, writing regular letters to *The Irish Times*, sometimes in the names of actual people: then he would write follow-up letters denouncing his own correspondence.

Eventually the editor took him on as a columnist, commenting, "if we pay the bugger to contribute to this shuddering newspaper, he will probably no longer feel tempted to contribute gratis, under various pseudonyms, to the correspondence columns."

At *The Irish Times* he wrote thousands of columns, under the pseudonym of Myles na Gopaleen. They became hugely popular, filled with his idiosyncratic humour, usually combined with lacerating satire. He poked fun at politicians, government policies and the sacred cows of the time - even his own readers, whom he referred to as "smug, self-righteous swine, self-opinionated sod-minded suet-brained ham-faced mealy-mouthed streptococcus-ridden gang of natural gobdaws".

He was described by a colleague at *The Irish Times* as "a small, shy, taciturn character, angry, intolerant, irascible, extremely critical of the Establishment, violently opposed to pretension in any shape or form, and all very, very funny, with teeth like a rabbit and a greasy felt hat."

His first full-length novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, was full of characters from other fiction and legend, "on the grounds that there are already far too many existing fictional characters". Published in 1945, it was a radical work - some would say post-modernist before its time - and was widely praised - by James Joyce, among others. Typically O'Brien returned the compliment by complaining about the "cult of Joyce: I declare to God if I hear that name Joyce one more time I will surely froth at the gob."

When his second novel, *The Third Policeman*, was rejected by his publisher on the grounds that it was too "fantastic", he hid it, claiming that the manuscript had been blown away, page by page, from the boot of his car, during a drive round Ireland. It was only after his death that the text was retrieved and published, to great acclaim.

This rejection probably contributed to his alcoholic decline. A friend claimed that O'Brien had his ideas "in the brief interval between the time when his hangover was so insufferable that he couldn't bear to talk to anybody and the time when the 'cure' (i.e. more drink) began to take effect." He died in 1966, at the age of 54.

Bill Scott 2017.