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In Memoriam

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In Memoriam

John Wyse Jackson

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John Wyse Jackson was an Irishman, the son of the Bishop of Limerick, a bookseller, a scholar, a Joycean, a Mylesian, as well as a husband, father, and friend. He wasn't, like James Joyce's Simon Dedalus, a praiser of his own past: not because he didn't have stories to tell – he had more than most people I've met – but because they rarely involved praise for himself. Any self-congratulation was apt to be muted or laughed away: he was a modest man as well as a gifted one.

John was born in Kilkenny in 1953 and graduated from Trinity College Dublin. By then, I believe, he was already immersed in much of the literature of Ireland, and indeed elsewhere, that would figure large in the rest of his life. (He also once said that his father had owned a copy of *Ulysses* while a Trinity student in 1929: a detail for that book's curious history.) In 1978, John joined the staff of the bookseller John Sandoe in Chelsea. He worked there for a quarter of a century and became a partner in the business. Bookselling was a very large part of his professional life. Having moved back to Ireland in 2003, in 2011 he opened another bookshop, Zozimus in Gorey, Co. Wexford. Zozimus, named for a 19th-century Irish street poet but hinting at magic, became not only a successful bookshop but, by all accounts, a local institution, a gathering place for reading groups and lovers of books, a social space with café attached. To be so involved with the practical business of acquiring and selling books both answered John's bibliophilia and fed it. He learned things about books from dealing in them that many of us, less knowledgeable about books' varied physical careers, never do.

But it was as a scholar that I, and many people in what can now be called the Flann O'Brien community, came to know John. He was a stalwart of the Charles Peake *Ulysses* Seminar, a University of London institution founded in 1986 by Andrew Gibson of Royal Holloway and named after a late Joycean. By the time I joined the group a decade later, John seemed a fixture, one of a few senior members. Robert Hampson, an *avant-garde* poet disguised as a mild-mannered academic, read the text aloud for the group to analyse. His Royal Holloway colleague Katie Wales would make comments from her own field of stylistics. Nora Joyce's biographer Brenda Maddox spent spells at the seminar. Bernard McGinley, an erudite Glaswegian who collaborated with John on more than one project, would offer gnomic interpretations that could be more

obscure than Joyce's text. And John's role, often, would be to bring things down to earth, by asserting a Dublin fact – about the location of a street, a name, a member of the extended Joyce family – which sometimes undercut more fanciful interpretations with its grounded straightforwardness. The gesture reminded one of John's own Irishness – often he was the only Irish person in the room – and belonged to a long tradition of Irish readers setting foreigners straight about Joyce by pointing to empirical basics that only a local knew. (Numerous examples of this can be found in John Ryan's 1970 anthology *A Bash in the Tunnel*, a book with Mylesian roots.¹) Yet from John, this was never anti-intellectualism; he didn't believe that a clarifying fact expelled all ambiguity or conceptual interest, only that it was worth everyone knowing it.

It was in those seminars and at drinks afterwards – in a hotel bar on Bedford Square, then in the Newman Arms on Rathbone Street, then the Hope on Tottenham Street – that I became familiar with John. I can picture him once standing across the room, making a gesture at me, till eventually, with slight alarm, I asked him what he was saying. He explained that he was asking: 'Would you like a nice pint?' These were days before the smoking ban, so John would increase his satisfaction by lighting his pipe over a drink.

The first thing I ever read by him was his column 'The Lastlap Bell' in *Odyssey*, the newsletter of the James Joyce Society of London. Rereading now the edition from Spring 1995, I find John's writing as diverting as ever, and flecked with a little of the spirit of Myles; he concludes by warning us of what he'll write about in future editions, 'if you don't behave yourselves.' But I came to learn that John had done rather larger work than this in the Joycean field. He and Bernard McGinley had produced an annotated and illustrated edition of *Dubliners* (1993), which some consider one of the finest ever made of that book.² In 1997 came *John Stanislaus Joyce*, a biography of the writer's father, which John had co-written with Peter Costello.³ Critics were attempting to read Joyce in relation to a more densely conceived Irish history, and this book's wealth of detail about the father's generation made a rich contribution. Andrew Gibson, whose publications on Joyce have been exceptional in their historical specificity, would often remark on the biography's distinct importance; it is among the most widely recognised of John's works.

But just beyond the border of Joyce studies, I came to realise that this was also the same John Wyse Jackson who had edited a book that I owned: *Myles Before Myles*, a 1988 anthology of early and obscure pieces by Brian O'Nolan (occasionally, but not usually, writing as Flann O'Brien).⁴ It was as extraordinary a comic production as I had ever read. The early works of Brother Barnabas and friends in *Comhthrom Féinne* at University College Dublin (UCD) were followed by the brio of *Blather*, taking almost 70 pages of the book (and it could justly have taken more). The only thing that could match that material arrived in another glorious 40-page section compiling many of the

Irish Times letters, from F. O'Brien, Lir and Luna O'Connor, Whit Cassidy, Lanna Avia, Na2 Co3, Oscar Love, and more.

While the genius was O'Nolan's, with some help from Niall Montgomery and others, the book itself would not have existed without John Wyse Jackson. Those of us who write about Flann O'Brien today might think of this material as a standard reference point (assisted by its welcome republication by Lilliput in 2011), but at the time, no one else in half a century had reprinted it. John's introduction makes clear that prior to this volume,

Much of Brian O'Nolan's most interesting and entertaining work has never been published in book form. Most of his writings from the thirties, for example, which include some of his funniest excursions, and which display several nearly unknown aspects of his work, have lain in almost complete obscurity since then.⁵

John's work in reviving this material was commercial: *Myles Before Myles* was a trade publication with Grafton, who also published Anthony Cronin's *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* a year later.⁶ But it was scholarly too. It includes material from the *Irish*, mostly translated by the great Irish Mylesian Breandán Ó Conaire (though John was better placed than most to make his own translations), and O'Nolan's articles for *The Bell*, whose historical and critical interest is only more apparent now. The book ends with a conscientious list of sources such as many equivalent popular anthologies lack. It had evidently taken John some meticulous work in the libraries: UCD, National Library of Ireland, and the British Library, where I recall John telling me he had called up a tranche of *Razzle* and the whole of *Blather* had been folded inside it – or was it the reverse?

On publication, *Myles Before Myles* joined a wave of interest in Flann O'Brien, notably including the 1986 Flann O'Brien Symposium in Dublin referred to at the start of John's introduction; the accompanying exhibition that resulted in Costello and van de Kamp's richly illustrated biography (1987)⁷; and, not least, Cronin's biography, which would be the most important point of reference for critical writing for years to come. These ventures naturally thanked John for his assistance; he knew as much about their subject as almost anyone. He had, in fact, considered writing the biography himself. But in, say, 2000, *Myles Before Myles* still appeared a brilliant outlier, seldom referred to by academics or anyone else. Hindsight shows it as a foundation stone of what, in the 2010s, turned out to be Flann O'Brien Studies.

If this was one of John's most telling contributions, there were others too. One was his brief yet provocative pamphlet *Phenolphthalein: A Fictional Quest for the Eighth Plot* (1996), which wound his own story into the birth of modern metafiction *via* Flann

O'Brien and Jorge Luis Borges.⁸ But *Flann O'Brien At War* (1999) was John's second most significant work as an editor of O'Nolan.⁹ It gathered columns from the early, Emergency years 1940–45, none of which had ever appeared in book form before. It thus complemented the crucial earlier collection *The Best of Myles* (1968), which had drawn on a similar period.¹⁰ A physically attractive volume, *At War* featured new illustrations by Hector McDonnell, as well as Myles's own original images. (Sage in bookselling's ways, John also produced a special limited edition of the book, renamed *Golden Hours*, as a private money-spinner.) The columns were all helpfully dated in a final bibliography, but John also took the bold decision to present them as a continuous narrative, in eight chapters each framed by his own summary. This might risk distorting the content of the columns into a shape imposed by the editor – it was a bookselling gesture, not one for a scholarly edition – but the conceit did not ask to be taken too seriously. The notion of reading the columns as a consecutive, developing work does, in any case, have some cogency, and John elaborated on it superbly in his introduction. These ten pages may be the best that John published about O'Nolan. They still have considerable critical value today, succinctly covering key and complex questions: O'Nolan's names, the arc of his career, his relation to nationalist, liberal and Protestant fractions of the Irish middle class of the time. Here he records 'ferreting wildly through back issues of the *Irish Times* in libraries' and being 'rewarded with almost 3,000 more columns in tiny print.' This was around 40 years before members of the International Flann O'Brien Society began to plan extensive scholarly editions of the columns, in print or online. John's introduction is remarkable for its suggestive description of *Cruiskeen Lawn*:

It amounted to perhaps four million words in all, and it was, to my mind incontrovertibly, a hugely original and triumphantly sustained work of art. How could this marvel have lain there unrecognised for so long? [...] Here was surely one of the great monuments of the century, a modernist (or rather a proleptically postmodernist) *coup de maître*, written in two primary and several secondary languages whose boundaries are repeatedly breached and confused. I began to think of 'Cruiskeen Lawn' as some unidentified subspecies of the fiction family, a random, episodic, wildly innovative rough beast of a 'novel,' in which the novel form itself has been stretched to screaming point and beyond.¹¹

The description provides a rationale for John's experiment in presenting *At War* as a continuous narrative. It also offers a reevaluation of *Cruiskeen Lawn* that has only been further amplified by critics over the subsequent two decades. John was a pioneer in the critical attention given to the column in this period.

In the early 2000s I wrote a short book on Flann O'Brien myself, for the series *Writers & their Works*. John was not only the most knowledgeable person on the subject I knew but, at that time, almost the *only* acquaintance who knew anything about it. He kindly agreed to read the typescript and returned it with his marginal comments. I still have that document: I always felt that his attention had made it one for the archive. (He in turn would probably have found that view amusingly absurd.) The first page bears six corrections, but as the MS progressed he relented and didn't point out many mistakes. I was slightly embarrassed by the number of errors with Irish names and accents that he had quietly pointed up, but that was probably the most likely class of blemish from an English writer. The published book, in any case, contains fewer errors than it would have done without his attention. Beside my comment that the Brother might have created people who spoke like the Brother, John added two green ticks of agreement, autobiographically based: 'very much so in the Dublin of the 1970s, among students at least.' In one other marginal note he asks if an anecdote is taken from John Ryan's *Remembering How We Stood* (1975), and adds in parentheses: '(He told it to me).'¹²

That was part of the fascination of taking to John about Myles: that while he had not known the man himself, he was only one degree of separation from him, having met Evelyn O'Nolan, Niall Sheridan, John Ryan, and others. I was soon able to hear more such stories because, having read my manuscript, he invited me to his home for lunch. It was a big house in Purley Oaks, Croydon, decorated with stolen signs from the rail network, with a noisy spaniel and an attic study. In this calm booklined eyrie was a ton of Joyce material including copies of *Thom's Directory*; a good deal of Oscar Wilde, whose more *recherché* writings John had also edited for publication¹³; and a trove of Brian O'Nolan. First editions of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Béal Bocht*, and colourful later copies from the 1950s and 1960s; the frail hardback of *Myles Before Myles* (John occasionally told me that this edition was a rarity and would disintegrate if handled); the 1951 *Envoy* special on Joyce. Original copies of *Razzle* had cost him 50p an issue. John emptied a stream of folders in front of me: photocopies of columns, letters (O'Nolan writing to an editor about getting his 'Comic Opera' out), endless typed-out pages which did or didn't make it into John's collections. John asked, with undue modesty, whether I thought he could get another book out of his mine of raw material. He owned a first edition of the 1943 *Cruiskeen Lawn* anthology ('Myles na gCopaleen crowned King of Ireland') and said that he was working on a new edition of it.¹⁴ To the end of the day he was meditating on this, worrying that the editor wouldn't buy it. I suppose they didn't, which is our loss.

Over a roast and red wine, John and his wife Ruth talked with bemusement of their children's evasion of parental control. Ruth said she had never got anything out of Myles (though I think they remained listeners to Terry Wogan, whose earlier borrowings from Myles had appealed to John), and that before my visit she had asked

John if I was 'normal,' as visiting O'Nolan scholars in the past had proved eccentric. John told of unusual customers to John Sandoe's bookshop: Don Gifford and, admittedly less influential in Joyce studies, Elton John. As rain fell through Sunday outside, John and I spent hours more in his high study, scouring files and talking Myles. The Sexton Blake mystery: was he or wasn't he Stephen Blakesley?¹⁵ The stories were here, but giving little away. John Masefield's secret letters to a secret lover: here were the originals, in their little envelopes. John was planning to produce a book on Masefield, Jack Yeats, and pirates. He talked of that again, some seventeen years later in Dublin.

After John returned to Ireland in 2003, he initially vanished from the lives of those of us in the Joyce seminar. Yet, curiously, I write this memoir with a sense of knowing him much more recently too. In the last decade I saw John at a series of large academic conferences. On each occasion, while there might be numerous people at the event I was glad to see, it was typically with John that I would spend the most time. I suppose I wanted to make the most of his fund of knowledge, memory, and stories while I could. And he was simply good company: cheerful, wry, whimsical, generous.

In October 2011, Carol Taaffe organised a centenary Flann100 symposium at Trinity College Dublin. As dusk fell outside the boxy new Long Room Hub on Friday night, amid various friendly Flann scholars and a display of sometimes relevant photographs, here was John, an unexpected delight. He hadn't been in Vienna at the inaugural symposium in July, puckishly commenting 'it sounds like too much fun.' He told of his new bookshop and its attached café: we were all impressed and said we must get down to Gorey some time. He attended panels in the concrete cavern of a lecture theatre with his old collaborator Peter Costello, hatching a new plan; we joined Anthony Cronin and company for dinner, another brush with fame. On the last day I asked to take a picture of John for posterity; indulging his random humour, he insisted on posing for it by leaning on a handwash dispenser.

A year before the 2015 Flann O'Brien Prague symposium he wrote to me with the crossword heading 'FOB – me off?,' musing on whether he should attend. I was glad that he did. In Prague's sunlit winding streets he was diverted for what seemed like hours by an independent bookshop, Shakespeare & Sons (though he reported it to me as Shakespeare & Daughter). After Catherine Ahearn had given a paper describing her work editing *Cruiskeen Lawn*, John described the process of his own *At War*. His self-deprecation, sixteen years on, was characteristic: 'I had a, I hoped vaguely Mylesian conceit, that it was a bit of a novel. It works reasonably well, but I still worry that it misrepresented the whole thing, rather badly.' He expressed excitement and approval at what the new generation was promising to do with editions of the column. It was typical of John, by now in his sixties, to have no proprietorial resentment whatever of younger generations: on the contrary he encouraged the work of people half his age.

That was made still more explicit in John's own paper, an account of his almost lifelong attempts to translate Myles from Irish. The story included the loan of a scrapbook of *Cruiskeen Lawn* cuttings from future Senator David Norris; discoveries of texts that 'might be Myles' but might well not be; disastrous meetings with vanishing publishers; and John's one-time plan to produce a parallel text of Irish and English, which would have 'the disadvantage that everyone could see how badly I'd done the job.' I was charmed by John's closing words and transcribed them in full. The scholars now taking on *Cruiskeen Lawn* editions, he said, 'have my full support, my admiration, and my sympathy. It's a huge undertaking but we must start somewhere. As Myles said, Rome wasn't built in A.D.' It was as richly detailed and entertaining a paper as I heard anyone give in Prague. John, of course, was shyly dismissive of his own efforts.

In June 2016, the International James Joyce Symposium came to London, and within the grey walls of Senate House I saw John give an equally enthralling presentation: this time on how the Bloomsday 'jant' of 1954 had been hatched by Brian O'Nolan and Patrick Kavanagh as, somehow, a money-spinning venture, to which the film footage was supposed to be central. It's hard now – especially if you've seen the film – to see how this plan could have worked, but John, in collaboration with Peter Costello, had done extensive research into it for what promised to be an illustrated book. It was one of his most interesting projects, and I regret that it never saw full fruition. As we parted on Marchmont Street at the end of the week, John mused on 'all the things we learned from the conference ... but we forget half of it and must relearn.'

I last saw John in Dublin, at the Flann O'Brien symposium in July 2019. Standing outside the Porterhouse on Nassau Street in early evening, he recounted a trip to rural Transylvania. We lost the trail of our group and wound up drinking upstairs in the Palace Bar, where we came across a photograph of Myles with two others that neither of us could recall ever seeing before. It was characteristic of John to be continually discovering or rediscovering, always expressing surprise or interest, never jaded. Late at night, seeking any sustenance we could find, we ate pizza under harsh striplights above Westmoreland Street. John, a few pints in, retailed unrepeatabe rumours of the private lives of literary Dubliners of the past. The next day we rode from UCD's southern campus back to the city centre on the top deck of a bus. As usual, I prompted him to tell stories: there were still so many I hadn't heard. As Donnybrook and Ballsbridge passed below, he recalled the 1986 Symposium. Hugh Kenner watching the silent film from 1954 and telling John, beside him, what songs Myles and Kavanagh were singing: Kenner, his hearing impaired, could lip-read. Evelyn O'Nolan asking to meet John Banville. John going off on a romantic adventure one night and leaving Paul Muldoon staying at the Jackson family home: he returned to find the uniquely gifted poet politely talking with his mother. We stopped for a pint outside – why not? – McDaid's on Harry Street, where John told me that the cellar trapdoor is the one

that Tom Kernan has fallen down at the start of Joyce's 'Grace.' (Well, he did co-edit the annotated *Dubliners*.) As more contemporary *Dubliners* cheerfully drank around us, John pulled from his satchel a vast document of A4 pages: a catalogue of his own personal Flann O'Brien holdings. It went on for many pages; the collection's monetary value, as I recall, was high.

I last saw him the day the conference ended, disembarking from a bus on the way to St Stephen's Green. I can recall wanting to be sure to say goodbye properly, knowing that, the way these things worked, we might not meet again for another couple of years. We emailed each other a few days later: he shared an extract from a remarkable novel he'd come across that described the old Palace Bar culture. He signed off with hopes of meeting and collaborating again before long, and a dry line which, on surprised rereading, makes me think I must have seemed quite inadvertently censorious about his habits: 'You have inspired me to give up (pro tem, probably) consumption of the contents of my little illicit pipe, but not yet that of the beasts of the fields.'

I wasn't one of John's best friends or close colleagues; merely someone with whom he was happy to talk about Flann O'Brien. Yet what I perceive in recalling all these encounters is the ease of being with him, the pleasure of his company that was always so quickly regained. He could occasionally be anxious, and certainly meditative; but more than that I remember a man with a gift for happiness, which was strongly rooted in his sense of absurdity, his healthily amused perspective, his readiness to enjoy whatever was to hand, his appreciation of sheer silliness. That naturally made him an ideal reader for the Brother, the Plain People of Ireland, Brother Barnabas, the Pooka MacPhellimey, and the rest.

To an unusual degree among major prose writers, Brian O'Nolan produced short works: articles, columns, letters, spoofs. As such, more than most writers he has required editors. The greatest of those was R. M. Smyllie, who effectively called *Cruiskeen Lawn* into being. Others have also been of great significance or merit: Kevin O'Nolan producing *The Best of Myles*; Maebh Long labouring to give us the *Collected Letters*.¹⁶ But to any list of O'Nolan's great editors I would submit John Wyse Jackson, who worked over piles of secretly hilarious pages that no one else bothered with in years when it was neither very profitable (did Grafton's advance cover the hours he put in to *Myles Before Myles*?) nor obviously popular (there was, happily, a general readership, but almost no academic community to support him). He was the greatest Mylesian I knew, and one of the purest scholars I ever met, doing it all out of the love of books. With his unexpected passing, the community of Flann O'Brien's readers has lost a unique link to the past, as well as a dear friend. But I think he would have liked to be remembered in fond conviviality, on firm grounds and licensed premises.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Notes & references

- ¹ *A Bash in the Tunnel: James Joyce by the Irish*, ed. John Ryan (Brighton: Clifton Books, 1970).
- ² *James Joyce's 'Dubliners': An Illustrated Edition with Annotations*, eds. John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993).
- ³ John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce: The Voluminous Life and Genius of James Joyce's Father* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).
- ⁴ Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 7–8.
- ⁶ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989).
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- ⁸ John Wyse Jackson, *Phenolphthalein: A Fictional Quest for the Eighth Plot* (London: The Cuckoo Press, 1996).
- ⁹ Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien at War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940–1945*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999).
- ¹⁰ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. Kevin O Nolan (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968).
- ¹¹ O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien at War*, 8–11.
- ¹² John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at the Mid-Century* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975).
- ¹³ Oscar Wilde, *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Fourth Estate, 1991).
- ¹⁴ Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn: Extracts from the Daily Labours of the Wise Man Myles na gCopaleen Presented Here Safe from Extinction and Eternal Loss Through the Kindly Leave of the Persons Conducting the Irish Times* (Dublin: Cahill & Co., September 1943).
- ¹⁵ See John Wyse Jackson, 'The Mysteries of Flann O'Brien,' *The Spectator*, 30 January 1988, 31.
- ¹⁶ Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018).