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Brooker, Joseph (2019) Palimpsests: The Flann O'Brien Conference (University College Dublin, 16-19 July 2019). [Book Review]

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Palimpsests: The V International Flann O'Brien Conference University College Dublin, 16-19 July 2019

The International Flann O'Brien Society's inaugural symposium was staged in Vienna in 2011. Via Rome, Prague and Salzburg, this biannual event at last came home in July 2019 to University College Dublin, alma mater of Flann O'Brien (real name Brian O'Nolan), not to mention James Joyce. A location at the Belfield campus in Dublin's Southern suburbs, post-1960s architecture scattered across its green fields, also took the conference quite near to Stillorgan where O'Nolan lived out his later years. The modernisation of the university around the early 1970s was touched on in Anne Enright's public reading from her forthcoming novel.

Anyone who had imagined that discussion of Flann O'Brien would quickly prove finite would have been surprised by this four-day conference with four keynotes and numerous parallel sessions. Closing the symposium, society President Paul Fagan noted that his optimism about the field had been vindicated and pointed to certain emergent themes: popular fiction (as approached in Katherine Ebury's keynote on detective novels), animal and non-human life (as discussed by Einat Adar, Yaeli Greenblatt and Alana Gillespie), translation (as in the keynotes by Erika Mihályscá on Hungarian, and Louis de Paor on Irish). Compelling presentations included Maebh Long on the typewriter and the pen, with close attention to their uses in the writing of narratives within *At Swim-Two-Birds*; Tobias Harris on parallels with Heinrich Heine; Luke Gibbons and Conor Linnie on painting as a key mid-century Dublin context; Catherine Flynn and columnist Frank McNally on *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the *Irish Times*. Non-academic scholars presented incisive, original research: Pádraig ó Méalóid on the obscure *Sunday Dispatch*, James Bacon (wearing his railwayman's uniform) on O'Nolan's love of trains.

The familiar topic of O'Nolan's grudging debt to Joyce needed no further airing here. But knowledge of Joyce deeply pervaded this symposium not actually about him. Where else outside an actual Joyce event could one casually refer to episodes, stories, lines from Joyce's work in the certainty of being understood? Extra-curricular activities included two performances of O'Nolan's comic writing by the JoyceStagers, one led by performer and scholar Val O'Donnell and one compiled by Robert Nicholson, long-standing curator of Joyce's tower in Sandycove. In remarks after the performance, Nicholson suggested that he had started as a devotee of Flann O'Brien and only later turned to Joyce. But as so often with Flann O'Brien, that might have been a cod.

Joseph Brooker