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Brooker, Joseph (2021) Gerry McGowan and Andrew Sherlock (eds), *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien* (Wirral: Pen & Pencil Gallery). [Book Review]

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Gerry McGowan and Andrew Sherlock (eds), *The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien* (Wirral: Pen & Pencil Gallery, 2020), 192pp, ISBN: 9780992767051.

Burgeoning for a decade, Flann O'Brien Studies has also taken an archival turn. Forgotten works have been returned to print: Murphy & Hopper's *Short Fiction* (2013), Jernigan's *Plays & Teleplays* (2013), and mooted new editions of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns. Maebh Long's *Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* (2018) expanded the corpus as never before, gathering correspondence from thirty years in a field-altering work. McGowan and Sherlock's *Lost Letters* shows that even Long had not collected everything. The book presents a cache of letters found in Dublin long after Brian O'Nolan's death. Long's volume presents several letters from others to O'Nolan – including Sean O'Casey and Jameson's Irish Whiskey. *The Lost Letters* amplifies this aspect: almost every item here is addressed to, not written by, O'Nolan, and his prompts and replies can only be inferred – though Long's volume makes this a much easier task than it was.

The exchange between O'Nolan and O'Casey, already provided by Long, is here extended, as O'Casey in 1951 reacts angrily to a later column attacking *The Silver Tassie*. Quoting directly from O'Nolan's earlier letter, O'Casey uses his words against him and makes a fair case for the decline of Myles na gCopaleen from 'a great new scholar of satire' to a conformist 'pontificating with the pious' (80). The accuracy of the critique makes slightly painful reading for a devotee of Myles, but O'Casey's prose is as vividly characteristic as ever, even, as he was later wont to do, referring to himself in the third person.

The *Collected Letters* showed O'Nolan, after his retirement in 1953, tapping various bodies – Guinness, Jameson's, Underwood Typewriters – in what looked an increasingly desperate search for remuneration. Several replies in the *Lost Letters* further demonstrate his pursuit of this strategy. A letter from Buckingham Palace in 1954 politely informs him that the new Queen 'is not currently considering the employment of a private secretary' (95). The Catholic Church was a more plausible employer, but the Vatican, too, formally notes that 'it is normal for a representative of the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation – and certainly not the Vicar of Christ – to approach individuals for such roles rather than the other way around' (100). The Chinese government, in a letter hesitantly dated 1963, rejects O'Nolan's offer of a lecture tour (147). In 1959 O'Nolan can be found contriving a new quiz show for Radio Éireann, called *A Word in Your Ear*, in which panellists are required to provide the correct definitions of 'frequently misused words'. The doomed scheme is all too typical. O'Nolan had approached no less than Bertrand Russell as a potential panellist, but was predictably rebuffed (115-6).

Ambitious artistic schemes likewise fall at the first hurdle. Tennessee Williams in 1964 politely declines to write a play, from O'Nolan's scenario, about the Gate Theatre's Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards, and adds that to write about General Eoin O'Duffy would be to retread the 'story of proto-

fascist demagoguery' already essayed in Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). Tove Jansson cries off a collaborative cartoon strip on Irish mythology as 'both in practical and in artistic terms, simply not feasible' (93). Samuel Beckett in 1960 responds to a proposed 'joint Irish-French research project' on literary traditions with a brutally blunt 'No' (128). Albert Camus, two decades earlier, had brusquely refused to seek a Parisian publisher for the ill-fated *The Third Policeman* (56-7). Even letters that grant O'Nolan some reason for hope would all too evidently be unfulfilled. Bernard Shaw responds with tentative interest to an Irish sequel to *Saint Joan* (65-6), and Orson Welles more rumbustiously welcomes O'Nolan's proposal to adapt *Citizen Kane* (125-6), but we know that neither materialised.

Yet, amid this familiar catalogue of unfulfilled potential, other letters do offer some succour. James Joyce's assignation of 'the true comic spirit' to *At Swim-Two-Birds* is long familiar, though it has hitherto been verified only by Niall Sheridan's report (*Collected Letters*, p.245), and here Joyce, aligning the novel with Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), adds the adjective 'Dantean' (23). Jorge Luis Borges's enthusiasm for *At Swim* is also well attested, but reconfirmed here in a letter enclosing his review (27-29). The children's author Ted Geisel warmly salutes O'Nolan 'from one absurdist to another' (123). It is pleasing, too, that after Maebh Long's observation on the lack of letters between O'Nolan and his contemporaries Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan (*Collected Letters* xvi), both surface here (98, 106). Behan, especially, is unmistakable: arch, punning, blithe and robust. So is William Faulkner, whose two letters from Mississippi are among the most fascinating and moving documents here. In rolling, riverine sentences Faulkner muses on the shared histories of Ireland and the United States, making sense of *At Swim*'s cowboys by describing how Hollywood has sold such rural imagery back to its Hibernian source (44). As Nazi Germany menaces in 1941, Faulkner writes, with a nod to Yeats: 'as an old airman and veteran I dare say: Ireland will need her airmen now' (49).

One letter in the volume gives pause. It is signed by Clara Ungerland, who O'Nolan in a *Time* interview famously claimed was his late German wife. According to this letter (74), Ungerland had in fact lived through the war, and was now looking forward to a reunion with O'Nolan, even informing him that she had borne his child. O'Nolan's German adventures have always been a matter of speculation and doubt, but it has long been assumed that Clara Ungerland was a fabrication. It still appears most likely that her letter here was written by O'Nolan himself, compounding his *Time* fiction in a way that never saw print in his lifetime. To make this judgment, though, is to confront a fresh vista of doubt. Supposing that Clara Ungerland's letter is a fabrication, then how to be sure that the same does not apply to any item in the *Collected Letters* themselves? It was hardly beyond O'Nolan's capacity to forge letters from Niall Montgomery, Graham Greene, Sean O'Casey, or even himself.

The Lost Letters of Flann O'Brien adds to the archive in ways that are sometimes saddening, sometimes cheering, and often remarkable. Its own

authenticity is largely not in question. Yet some of its contents also point to the questions that we need to ask, a little more sceptically, about the authorship of the O’Nolan archive as a whole.