

Myles na gCopaleen's *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Politics of Revival¹

Germán Asensio Peral

Abstract: The relationship of the Irish state with its Celtic past has been a matter of concern for the different governments since Ireland achieved independent status in 1922. After the 1937 Constitution, and particularly from the 1940s onwards, there was a marked encouragement from officialdom towards reassessing autochthonous culture and its dissemination among Irish citizens. In this context, Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966), also known as Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen, wrote his famous series of satirical columns *Cruiskeen Lawn* from 1940 until his death. *Cruiskeen Lawn* appeared almost daily in *The Irish Times* and dealt with general topics of the country, its articles being normally written in a mock-ironic tone. One of the issues that Myles na gCopaleen had to face was the governmental aspirations of reviving Gaelic culture. He observed that these plans were fraught with inconsistencies, but his status as a civil servant prevented him from offering a frontal attack. This paper aims to analyze Myles na gCopaleen’s strategies when tackling this particular problem in his daily columns.

Keywords: Flann O’Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Time*, Ireland in the 1940s, Gaelic culture

Introduction

Brian O’Nolan (1911-1966) – also known as Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen, among many other pennames² – was born at a time when the decline of Irish as a minor language had been the cause of different reactions from a certain number of Irish people. A vindictive promotion of Irishness took on a life of its own in some nineteenth-century movements such as the Gaelic Revival. However, the attempts at reviving both the language and the culture were specially emphasized during the Irish Free State and after the 1937 Constitution.

O’Nolan’s father was obstinate enough not to send his children to an English-speaking school so they were homeschooled, at least during their early years. Their parents decided to speak to them only in Irish, even though their mother’s family spoke in English every time they came for a

visit. The O’Nolan children did not have many chances to get to know other children of their age since their father’s job implied moving from one part of Ireland to another until they were able to settle down in Dublin around 1923, when O’Nolan was twelve years old. Therefore, as they did not fully command the English language and their social development had been essentially restricted to family life, they were not able to successfully communicate with other children, something that the latter used as an excuse to bully them. O’Nolan’s brother Ciarán has recounted several incidents that he and his brothers suffered while studying at the Christian Brothers Schools in Synge Street:

The first thing that we had to face was the torment that was in store for us from our classmates. They recognized immediately that we were ‘green, soft and vulnerable’ and decided, as boys will, to have fun at our expense. [. . .] The whole school, or so it seemed, gathered around us. A lad would approach from behind and give you a push in the back. When you turned to confront him, the boy who was now at your back struck you.³

Thankfully, this phase soon passed and the O’Nolan children enjoyed a calmer adolescence. From the linguistic point of view, O’Nolan rapidly became proficient in English and eventually, when he became a writer, he wielded both English and Irish with equal mastery. This duality was pivotal to the internal structure of his first novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and very relevant to his other novels⁴ to a greater or lesser extent, but it was even more prominent in his famous series of *The Irish Times* columns *Cruiskeen Lawn* that ran from 1940 until O’Nolan’s death and was widely read across Ireland. It was during the 1930s and the 1940s that the Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland, with Éamon de Valera as *Taioseach*, began to embrace nascent attempts at reviving the Irish language and culture.⁵ Myles’s columns explored, in a satirical and mocking tone, the whole of Ireland’s social, cultural and economic aspects and problems. Flore Coulouma⁶ has pointed out that the majority of O’Brien’s critics have tended to approach his journalistic production as proof of O’Brien’s inexplicable provincial attachment to Dublin – probably, this has been the cause of *Cruiskeen Lawn*’s unsuccessful reception on the part of most of O’Brien’s scholars. The question of Irishness was more deeply analysed in his second published novel, *The Poor Mouth*, written originally in Irish under the title of *An Béal Bocht*. In this text, he explores, ironically and tragicomically, the situation of Irish speakers at that time and how the Gaelic world is destabilised by the

cultural interference of the English. Keith Hopper⁷ asserts that by the time that *The Poor Mouth* was published, 'O'Brien was confronted with two towering traditions: the jaded legacy of Yeats's Celtic Twilight and the problematic complexities of Joyce's modernism'. The fact is that while O'Nolan mainly explored the former in his journalism and the latter in his novels and other works, it is true that both traditions are intertwined in his work: he did not restrict modernist experimentation to novelistic production, but toyed with it in some of his columns; even the question of Irishness, which is central to *Cruiskeen Lawn*, also plays an important role in his novelistic production.

However, it was perhaps the matter of Ireland's Celtic Past and its contemporary rendition that O'Nolan, through his Myles na gCopaleen persona, was particularly interested in: he was perfectly aware that these efforts at reseeding a sense of Irishness among the population were being made by the government. His acute and often satirical observations quickly suggested that the politics of promoting Gaelic culture were rife with imperfections and double-talk. This was examined both in his columns and in *The Poor Mouth*, as John Updike⁸ has pointed out: 'the tale has the advantage of a relatively clear, if extravagant, story line and a distinct satiric point – i.e. that the Irish Republic's official cherishing of the nearly extinct Gaelic language ignores the miserable poverty of its surviving speakers, the rain-battered peasantry of the countryside'. However, given his position as a civil servant, he had to tread carefully in his own columns, apart from adopting a pseudonym and covering his identity – something that was compulsory for any published civil servant. Myles na gCopaleen took a definite stand on this topic: he denounced in a critical and satirical tone most of the government's attempts at resurrecting Ireland's true Celtic past. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore some of Myles na gCopaleen's columns with the aim of assessing his definitive views on this issue.⁹

Myles na gCopaleen and the Revival

The situation of Irish culture and language was distressing during the early days of the Irish Free State. Politically speaking, Ireland was no longer tied to England and the country was building itself up from its foundations. There was also a kind of implicit nostalgia, a melancholic look to the past. There seemed to exist a longing for a lost identity. As Fintan O'Toole¹⁰ has commented in relation to the cultural revivalism of the time, 'the Irish nationalist revolution, and its accompanying revival of literature was precisely a revolution which drew its poetry from the past'. There was thus

a clear desire on the part of the Irish Free State government to unearth Ireland's Celtic past and the revival of the Irish language was viewed as the perfect tool to do so. Liam de Paor¹¹ assesses de Valera's ideal vision of the country as a 'more or less self-contained Ireland, with a decent way of life deeply rooted in a rural past and in a frugal sufficiency [. . .], an ideal, vision or image shared by quite a few of those who fought for independence and steered the course of the infant Irish state'. Consequently, to escape from British influence meant to find an Irish identity stemming from the Ireland of Celtic times and its language. This renewal of Ireland, according to Donald McNamara,¹² 'took many forms, including ostentatious rejection of anything (even sports) that smacked of Britishness, official (if not genuine) embracing of the Irish language, and a resurrection of ancient myths.' Primarily, Ireland's defining element was seen as its language, Irish or Gaelic; given that, de Valera felt bound to reinstate Irish as the primary language in every sense: cultural, social, political and administrative. Indeed, as Breandan O'Conaire¹³ has mentioned, there was an 'official lip-service paid to the Language Revival'.

Myles quickly noticed this phenomenon. He had been extremely engaged with the question of Irish culture and language since his childhood. Although Irish was not the mother tongue of either of his parents, the only language spoken at home was indeed Gaelic due to nationalistic ideologies. Brian O'Nolan did not receive any formal education – neither in Irish nor in English – until the age of twelve, but his parents addressed him exclusively in Irish in the meantime, a fact that allowed him to acquire a deep and competent knowledge of the language unlike many people living in urban areas. When O'Nolan enrolled in University College Dublin, he realised that even his own professors – among which were several promoters of the late Gaelic League – spoke incorrect Irish.¹⁴ It is thus quite possible that O'Nolan's debunking of wannabe Irish speakers stemmed from his university years. In fact, when he left UCD in 1934 he founded *Blather*, a comic magazine along with his brother Ciáran and Niall Sheridan which only lasted for five issues. One of the first articles of the magazine, where O'Nolan wrote under the pseudonym of O'Blather, asserted that *Blather's* audience 'will be glad to hear that we are neither negligent nor careless in matters pertaining to the ancestral tongue'.¹⁵ Even some of his short prose of the 1930s is considerably in line with the future satirical approach to the cultural revival of the 1940s observed in *Cruiskeen Lawn*.¹⁶ Furthermore, O'Nolan's proficient knowledge of the language was the most important asset he had when he decided to apply for a position in the Civil Service. O'Nolan was one of the most suitable candidates for the post since the government was

in extreme need of people who spoke Irish correctly.¹⁷ An appropriate example which can be used to illustrate how Myles perceived the government's anxious need for people who spoke Irish fluently is the following extract from a column called 'The Royal Irish Academy of the Post War World'. This Royal Academy, whose supposed president is Myles na gCopaleen (the da), 'is making arrangements for turning this country into a limited liability company. Every person who is an existing 'Irish national' will automatically become a shareholder unless he formally opts to be 'an excepted person'.¹⁸ Myles feels at a certain moment the need for no longer being an Irish citizen, so he writes a letter to the Chairman of the Board:

Dear Chairman—I write to tender with great regret my resignation from the Irish people. I am compelled to take this step for personal reasons and trust yourself and your co-directors will see your way to accept it. Thanking you for past courtesies, M

Then the reply:

Dear M—The Board and I have considered the contents of your letter and are unanimous in expressing the hope that you will find it possible to reconsider your decision and agree to remain a member of the Irish nation. The Board wish me to stress the importance they attach to maintaining Irish personnel intact in the present serious state of the world.—J.J'.¹⁹

A continuous exchange of letters follows in which Myles na gCopaleen rejects his condition of Irish citizen while the Board of the Royal Academy keenly insists that he remain so. Finally, they encourage him to continue as 'a part-time Irishman'. Although incongruous and fantastical, the column might actually be understood as a satire of the government's desperate need to retain Irish speakers. This extract proves that, being then inside the sphere of officialdom, O'Nolan's account of the government's intention to revive Celtic culture was based on experience.

This issue was further explored during *Cruiskeen Lawn*'s earlier days; so much so, that O'Brien even wrote a novel in Irish dealing with this issue at that time, *The Poor Mouth*. The novel has been considered 'a blistering satire of Irish Revivalists who had no true understanding or appreciation of the Irish language or Irish culture',²⁰ as Myles's views on the subject are starkly unconventional: he was opposed to this new movement which stemmed from the pretentiousness of people who had no real appreciation for the language and used it at their will as a political tool to fuel nationalist

views at a time when there was a quest for cultural independence. Keith Hopper notices this fact, asserting that many of these individuals 'saw the language purely in nationalistic terms, and had constructed rather staid and sanctimonious attitudes to safeguard their political agenda'.²¹

His column production, however, is not so outspoken when approaching this sensitive subject. The Ireland of the 1940s was a country which had strict views on censorship and prevented free expression.²² Therefore, he had to silence his voice in some way and to employ a satirical and indirect language so as to avoid being censored. In fact, it must be taken into account when analysing Myles' columns that *The Irish Times* was, perhaps, one of the most strictly controlled mediums due to its pro-British condition at the time of the war.²³ A good example of his elusive language is the following:

What's this I have in me pocket? Dirty scrap of paper. Some newspaper heading I cut out. 'Language in danger'. Of course if I was a cultured European I would take this to mean that some dumb barbarous tonguetide threatens to drown the elaborate delicate historical machinery for human intercourse, the subtle articulative devices of communication, the miracle of human speech that has developed a thousand light-years over the ordnance datum, orphic telepathy three sheets to the wind and so on. But I know better.

Being an insulated western savage with thick hair on the soles of my feet, I immediately suspect that this fabulous submythical erseperantique patter, the Irish, that is under this cushion – beg pardon – under discussion.

Yes. Twenty years ago, most of us were tortured by the inadequacy of even the most civilised, the most elaborate, the most highly developed languages to the exigencies of human thought, to the nuances of interpsychic communion, to the expression of the silent agonized pathologies of the post-Versailles epoch. [. . .].

As far as I remember, I founded the Rathmines branch of the Gaelic League. Having nothing to say, I thought at that time that it was important to revive a distant language in which absolutely nothing could be said.²⁴

Wrapping his discourse in wordiness and oblique language, Myles is referring in this column, entitled 'Overheard', to those intellectuals within the Gaelic League who developed an artificial interest in the language and purposelessly devoted themselves to its learning. These kind of people are actually homologous to *The Poor Mouth's* Dublin *Gaeilgeoiri*²⁵ who were extremely obsessed with the language, even to the extent of using it to fulfil

metalinguistic functions; that is, using Irish to speak just about Irish. The narrator adopts the attitude of one of these scholars concerned about the language who, indeed, seemed to lack any kind of purpose when studying 'a distant language in which absolutely nothing could be said'. He even alleges that Irish only allows for an archaic and artificial speech which is pointless and useless for everyday communication. The final sentence is obviously packed with irony because Myles himself grew up speaking that language on a daily basis. As in the example provided below, 'Myles wished to demonstrate that this type of discourse was necessary to create a healthier climate for the promotion of Irish culture'.²⁶ The following extract, which expands on the topic, belongs to a column called 'The Gaelic', where Myles focuses on the lexical nature of Irish:

A Lady lecturing recently on the Irish language drew attention to the fact (I mentioned it myself as long ago as 1925), that while the average English speaker gets along with a mere 400 words, the Irish-speaking peasant uses 4.000. [...] My point is, however, is this. That the 400/4.000 ration is fallacious; 400/400.000 would be more like it. There is scarcely a single word in Irish (barring, possibly, *Sasanach*) that is simple and explicit. Apart from words with endless shades of cognate meaning, there are many with so complete a spectrum of graduated ambiguity that each of them can be made to express two directly contrary meanings, as well as a plethora of intermediate concepts that have no bearing on either.²⁷

This actually proves Myles's ambition 'to modernize the written language, to get away from the potatoes – stirabout – poitín, the turf-and-the-prayers image'.²⁸ This was, indeed, his purpose; however, people undoubtedly misunderstood his intentions assuming that he aimed 'to sabotage the propagation of the language and things Irish'.²⁹ This was something fairly difficult given his own devotion to the language and the culture, especially since he was in UCD, where he wrote an MA thesis entitled 'Nature in Irish Poetry'. Furthermore, he did not only want to innovate in linguistic terms; rather, his literary and journalist production repeatedly suggests that he wished to expand Ireland's introverted views in a general cultural sense and to internationalize Irish culture and literature.

There was, however, something that annoyed Myles so much that he felt compelled to offer his satirical views on the matter. If the political and intellectual echelons were indeed trying to revive the Irish language and to bring it into an Ireland emerging from the shadows of pastoral civilization, they ought to do it, at least, in a proper manner. However, Myles saw that their attempts were not as successful as they would have liked:

I have not been to the Abbey since the decline set in, nor indeed has Blythe sent me the customary free pass since the day we had words about the terminology adopted in the programme when plays in Irish are being presented. You have been there, of course, you have noticed that for the word 'stall' (costing 3/6, I think) they say: *steallai*.

My point was that such a term is *recherché*, difficult and obviously mined out of Dinneen and that there is no justification at all for using it when you have in Irish – every chisler in Dublin knows it – (ps. O'H. lease note spelling of chisler) the simple word: *stól*.

I might as well be talking to the wall, of course, though this phrase has always seemed strange in view of the belief that walls have ears. Equally fruitless was another effort I made about the title of the theatre. They call it 'Amharclann na Mainistreach' although everybody knows that 'mainistir' means monastery. Do they not then know the Irish for 'abbey'? Are they too stuck-up to ask someone who does?³⁰

The truth was that the Free State politicians and their use of the Irish language was nothing but a pretence, a kind of elitist discourse employed to boast of a scientifically and intellectually developed Celtic Ireland. As Cronin has pointed at, nothing could be further from the truth:

The first Free State Government had made Irish a compulsory subject for the school-leaving certificate and it became necessary to have some knowledge of it in order to obtain an official position of any kind. Strangely enough, from that moment on the fervent enthusiasm of the first generation of language enthusiasts began to give place to a widespread cynicism and apathy. The Irish people do not take kindly to compulsion and they have a keen eye for all forms of venality and jobbery.³¹

The sole consequences were that the Irish language began to lose instrumentality in communication and started to be conceived as a tool for achieving personal and political gain in different situations: for instance, civil servants did not hesitate to give their names an Irish spelling so as to be promoted; even politicians made sure to include some lines written in Irish at the beginning of their speeches and then delicately turn to English for the sake of non-speakers of Irish.³² Hence, it can be argued that Myles, throughout his columns, wanted to uncover 'the disingenuous interest of politicians for the native tongue'.³³ The natural beauty of the language had been corrupted by politicians: 'the more colourful phrases of Irish speech

were banished in favour of the jargon and the officialese which allows politicians to say nothing at great length'.³⁴

As anybody who has read Myles' journalism knows, his columns are not independent in nature but they actually strung together a well-grounded story with its own plot and characters. Although surrealistic enough to be noticed, most of the characters have indeed a looming presence: they appear and disappear from column to column. In actual fact, what Myles did was to forge 'a galaxy of creatures to aid him in his task of demolition',³⁵ a task which first implied destruction by satirical observation and then reconstruction. His long-term critique of the politics of linguistic revival was not an exception: Myles' contention was to relieve Ireland from those who wanted to revive its Celtic past for political purposes, to disinterestedly give the country its long-lost identity back. As Michael Henry Epp asserts, *Cruiskeen Lawn's* columns dealing with this issue 'are good evidence that O'Brien felt this to be one of his most important subjects, and one in which he took particular joy, as a satirist, to mock and correct'.³⁶ In this story of retrieval, one of the most famous characters is the figure of Dinneen, an Irish lexicographer who actually lived between 1860 and 1934. He appears in several columns to ironically represent the fruitless endeavours of reviving a language for non-speaking purposes and purely for political benefits. The following extract belongs to a column called 'Literally from the Irish':

The Irish lexicographer Dinneen, considered *in vacuo* is, heaven knows, funny enough. He just keeps standing on his head, denying stoutly that *piléar* means bullet and asserting that it means 'an inert thing or person'. Nothing stumps him. He will promise the sun moon and stars to anybody who will catch him out. And well he may. Just *take* the sun, moon and stars for a moment. Sun, you say, is *grian*. Not at all. Dinneen shouts that *grian* means 'the bottom (of a lake, well)'. You are a bit nettled and mutter that, anyway, *gealach* means moon. Wrong again. *Gealach* means 'the white circle in a slice of a half-boiled potato, turnip, etc.' In a bored voice he adds that *réalta* (of course) means 'a mark on the forehead of a beast'. Most remarkable man. Eclectic I think is the word.³⁷

The fact is that Patrick Stephen Dinneen was one of the leading figures of the Gaelic Revival, as was Myles's university lecturer – who was to become the first President of Ireland in 1937 – Douglas Hyde, who in O'Nolan's opinion spoke 'atrocious Irish'.³⁸ Both were figures who devoted their lives to the study of the Irish language in scholarly terms but, as it can be seen in Dinneen's lexicographical theories, they did not render

Irish as a language suitable for modern communicative purposes. What they produced instead was a language whose sole use seemed archaic, erudite and somewhat pedantic. It is interesting to note the use Myles makes of the word 'eclectic'. That is perhaps the view Myles' had towards various of these attempts of reviving the culture: what their promoters did was to 'select' in some way the things they wanted to revive, necessarily leaving behind many others, a strategy Myles conceives as artificial. While, as Epp³⁹ points out, the issue with Dinneen's definitions may be a parody, the fact is that Myles had read the dictionary and found Dinneen's definitions to be extremely obscure. This completely eliminated 'Irish-speakers' freedom to express themselves as they wished on the subjects they wished to discuss'.⁴⁰ As Myles says:

That, of course, is why I no longer write Irish. No damn fear. I didn't come down in the last shower. Call me a bit fastidious if you like but I like to have some idea of what I'm writing. Libel, you know. One must be careful. If I write in Irish what I conceive to be 'Last Tuesday was very wet,' I like to feel reasonably sure that what I've written does not in fact mean 'Mr So-and-So is a thief and a drunkard.'⁴¹

On the one hand, Epp suggests that perhaps what caused Myles to start writing less in Irish and more in English can be either the aforementioned question of the hypothetical difficulty of the language or a wish to expand his audience.⁴² However, my contention is that Myles's use of Irish decreased with time due to a personal refusal to write in a language which had been so ill-intentionally promoted and dishonoured by political manoeuvres.⁴³ Hopper follows the same line of argument by saying that 'the post-colonial Myles of *The Irish Times* ['] love of the Irish language and literature had been somewhat soured by the nationalist cavortings of Boucicault and later on, by the Celtic Revival of Yeats *et al*'.⁴⁴ The column dealing with Dinneen provides various examples of the extremes at which the promoters of Irish went to so to infuse the language with a supposed academic dignity. Nonetheless, Dinneen is not the only victim of Myles' satirical prose in this sense. Not only Dinneen, but Tomás Ó Criomhthain⁴⁵ (1856-1937) was also examined by Myles in terms of style when writing in Irish:

Your paltry English speaker apprehends sea-going craft through the infantile cognition which merely distinguishes the small from the big. If it's small, it's a boat, and if it's big it's a ship. In his great book *An tOileánach*, however, the uneducated Tomás Ó Criomhthain uses, perhaps, a dozen words to convey the concept of varying super-

marinity—*árthrach long, soitheach, bád, naomhóg, básd raice, galbhád, púcán* and whatever you are having yourself.⁴⁶

The case of Ó Criomhthain and Dinneen, as Myles sees it, does not contribute to the establishment of Irish as a language spoken on a daily basis. Particularly in the case of Dinneen, there is a direct attack against his Irish dictionary, which ‘intended to promote the Irish language for political purposes’ and ‘does nothing but render unintelligible a language the *Gaeligores* know little about’.⁴⁷ This links directly to the question of Irish and education which had been thoroughly examined by Myles in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. One of the columns belonging to ‘The Plain People of Ireland’ which is called ‘The Old Bone!’ touches on the topic in a very satirical style:

Sooner or later one comes back to this question of ‘compulsory Irish’ and from it that is not a long way off to the other question of teaching through the medium of Irish. It has been held that the teaching of ‘subjects’ other than fishing not through Irish but through the medium of Irish leads to a generation ‘illiterate in two languages’ and this venerable joke is expected to make us smile bitterly.⁴⁸

Curiously enough, even though Irish had been made compulsory in schools, lessons were not normally carried out in Irish but in English, something that Myles finds unpractical, nonsensical and hypocritical at the same time. He compares this fact to how he learnt the Greek language by means of a grammar written in Latin. At the end of the column he acknowledges that the ‘Irish educationalists, in reviving Irish, are therefore proceeding in a well-tried classical tradition’.⁴⁹ Myles na gCopaleen is pointing here at the government’s half-hearted interest in reviving the language for the sake of the country. In order to revive the language it would had been more appropriate to do it in some way that Irish would had been taught in Irish itself and not by means of English. The inconsistent teaching method of Irish – as if it were a dead language such as Greek or Latin – was proof of the government’s incoherence and a real problem for people like O’Nolan and his family, whose household language was exclusively Irish. Although O’Nolan had the chance of studying Irish grammar at Blackrock,⁵⁰ it was by no means used for didactic purposes in other subjects.⁵¹

All of the aforementioned examples of Myles’ criticism of political affairs regarding Gaelic culture show different approaches to the subject. There are, nonetheless, very few columns which address the theme in a direct way due to censorship. Among them, there are few which speak

about the real leader of the movement: de Valera himself. Scholars usually attribute such a revivalist project mainly to de Valera, as Timothy J. White⁵² does: 'Ireland's Celtic origins and identity have been emphasised by de Valera and other nationalist politicians who see Ireland's unique Celtic origins as justification for the political aspirations of independence and inspiration for policy once statehood has been achieved'. A column from the 'Irish and Related Matters' series finally involves and mentions de Valera as promoter of this movement. The following paragraph is satirically enlightening regarding the question:

In my lordship's view the movement to revive the Irish language should be persisted in. I hold that it is fallacious to offer the Irish people a simple choice between slums and Gaelic. [. . .] The horrible charge is made that Mr de Valera is spending half a million a year on reviving Irish. I may be a wild paddy but I take the view that the expenditure of public money on a cultural pursuit is one of the few boasts this country can make. Whether we get value for all the money spent on Irish, higher learning and on our university establishments is one question but that we spend liberally on these things is to our credit and when the great nations of the earth (whose civilizations we are so often asked to admire) are spending up to £100.000.000 (roughly) per day on destruction, it is surely no shame for our humble community of peasants to spend about £2.000 per day on trying to revive a language. It is the more urbane occupation. And what is half a million in relation to slum clearance? Faith now, could we be honest enough (for one moment) to admit to ourselves (in our hearts of hearts) that there is another sort of Irish, and forced down people's throats, too, and that we spend enough on it every year to re-build all Dublin.⁵³

Surely, the present extract is one of the most powerfully ironic passages that can be found in Myles' journalistic production regarding the issue this paper examines. To begin with, it must be noted that Myles himself asserts that what he is speaking is not his real opinion. At the beginning of the column, he writes:

Last week we had a rather stern address over here ——> regarding the inadmissibility of the Irish language and although it is almost a *gaffe* for anybody who is qualified to speak on this subject to express opinions on it in the public prints, I feel I must speak out; otherwise there is the danger that the lying rumour will be spread by my enemies that I am silent because once again money has changed hands. (It cannot be too often repeated that I am not for sale. I was bought in 1921 and the transaction was final and conclusive).⁵⁴

This preceding passage suggests that it was certainly dangerous for anybody's reputation to speak openly about personal opinions on the matter. In relation to the core question, most scholars interested in de Valera's life and politics openly admit that one of his first objectives as a politician was to revive the Irish language⁵⁵ but few of them acknowledge that his interest was almost exclusively political and not as nationalist as he would want it believed. Myles even exposes and criticises de Valera's use of public money in order to revive the Irish language. What he really means is that the money de Valera spent on the revival did not profit Ireland at all and that boasting about that fact ridiculed Ireland in the eyes of other European countries. In fact, Myles later emphasises that there is 'probably no basis at all for the theory that a people cannot preserve a separate national entity without a distinct language'.⁵⁶ Therefore, what must be considered here is that 'though Myles loved the language he abhorred the purist protectionists'.⁵⁷ He was a philologist of the language and, as a result, it was understandable that he rejected and repelled all hypocritical and cynical attempts of reviving a language that was not actually cherished at all; at least, by the promoters of these revivalist schemes. The movement was artificial and self-interested, as Myles had automatically perceived from the very beginning. He concludes his column by saying that 'the whole bustle of reviving it [Irish], the rows, the antagonism and the clashes surrounding the revival are interesting and amusing. There is a profusion of unconscious humour on both sides'.⁵⁸

This article has aimed to demonstrate that Brian O'Nolan, under his Myles na gCopaleen pseudonym for *The Irish Times's* column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, was perfectly conscious of the fact that the Irish government tried to rebuild Ireland's identity by basing it on a vision of its Celtic past and using the language to forge a new identity. Myles na gCopaleen observed and assessed all the flaws, inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the government's intentions of reviving both the culture and the language. The main question that Myles dealt with was the validity of this rebirth: was it for improving nationalistic goals or was it for the purposes of political stability? Myles' outlook definitely leans towards the latter. However, it must be marked that most of *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns remain either unpublished or untranslated. Therefore, as most of O'Nolan's production – not only journalism but also purely literary pieces – is still in continuous appraisal, the subject-matter of this article is thoroughly valid for further research.

Notes and References

- 1 The research on this essay was supported by the project CEI Patrimonio, University of Almería, Spain.
- 2 Throughout this article, Brian O’Nolan will be used for biographical references whereas Myles na gCopaleen will be used when discussing his journalist production.
- 3 Ciarán Ó Nualláin, *The Early Years of Brian O’Nolan / Flann O’Brien / Myles na gCopaleen* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press 1998) 63.
- 4 That is, *The Third Policeman* (1940, published posthumously in 1967) *The Poor Mouth* (1941), *The Hard Life* (1961) and *The Dalkey Archive* (1964).
- 5 Irish nationalism based on Ireland’s Celtic identity was something continual since the nineteenth century.
- 6 Flore Coulouma, ‘Tall Tales and Short Stories: *Cruiskeen Lawn* and the Dialogic Imagination’, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. John O’Brien (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011) 162.
- 7 Keith Hopper, *Flann O’Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press 2009) xv.
- 8 John Updike, ‘Back Chat, Funny Cracks: The Novels of Flann O’Brien’, 11 February 2009, web, 8 April 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/02/11/080211crbo_books_updike>.
- 9 Several anthologies have been published compiling O’Nolan’s journalistic production. However, given to the size of the latter, most of them only include a certain percentage of his columns. The anthology used for this article is *The Best of Myles* (1993), which is probably the most comprehensive of them.
- 10 Fintan O’Toole, ‘Going West: The Country versus the City in Irish Writing’, *The Crane Bag* 9 (1985): 11.
- 11 Liam De Paor, ‘Ireland’s Identities’, *The Crane Bag* 3 (1979): 22.
- 12 Donald McNamara, ‘Myles of Writing: Brian O’Nolan’s Newspaper Columns’, *Literary Journalism Studies* 4 (2012): 30.
- 13 Breandan O’Conaire, ‘Flann O’Brien, *An Beal Bocht* and Other Irish Matters’, *Irish University Review* 3 (1973): 122.
- 14 Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990): 59.
- 15 Flann O’Brien, *Myles Before Myles* (London: Grafton, 1988): 163.
- 16 Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, ‘Introduction: The Invisible Author’, *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013): 8.
- 17 Cronin 81.
- 18 Flann O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* (London: Flamingo, 1993): 362.
- 19 O’Brien 362-363.
- 20 McNamara 39.
- 21 Hopper 30.
- 22 Although Ireland’s neutrality during the Second World War ensured exclusion from continental battlefields, during this period known as The Emergency, Ireland was caught in a crossfire of interests between sides thus provoking side effects in the country such as censorship. According to María José López Córdoba ‘El

- ingenio periodístico de Brian O’Nolan/Myles na Gopaleen’, *Joyceana: literaria hibernica*, eds. María Elena Jaime de Pablos and José Manuel Estevez Saá. (Almería: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Almería, 2005), *The Irish Times* intended to divert the citizens’ attention from warfare issues by means of funny, witty and intellectual journalistic content such as Myles’s columns. These columns, however, had to be rendered neutral and antiseptic before publishing.
- 23 Cronin 130.
- 24 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 103.
- 25 That is, Irish language lovers. *The Poor Mouth* features them as people coming from the city of Dublin to Corca Dhorcha, a fictional Irish country location where the action of the novel takes place. They arrive in the so-called town and observe and study Gaelic customs and traditions with a scholarly degree of interest.
- 26 Hopper 30.
- 27 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 278.
- 28 O’Conaire 126.
- 29 Cronin 129.
- 30 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 39.
- 31 Cronin 135.
- 32 Cronin 135.
- 33 Coulouma 174.
- 34 Cronin 133.
- 35 O’Conaire 122.
- 36 Michael Henry Epp, *Saving Cruiskeen Lawn: Satirical Parody in the Novels and Journalism of Flann O’Brien* (Monreal: McGill University, 1999): 79.
- 37 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 276-277.
- 38 Cronin 59.
- 39 Epp 80.
- 40 Epp 79.
- 41 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 277.
- 42 Epp 81.
- 43 The then editor of *The Irish Times*, Robert Maire Smyllie, originally envisioned *Cruiskeen Lawn* as being written thoroughly in Irish. However, as López Córdoba asserts, during the two first years of the column, 331 articles of 556 were written in Irish whereby between 1944 and 1962 just 27 of 3.198 were written or half-written in Irish (155).
- 44 Hopper 26.
- 45 Tomás Ó Criomhthain was a native Irish-speaking writer who published *Allagar na h-Inise* (Island Cross-Talk, 1928) and *An t-Oileánach* (The Islandman, 1929).
- 46 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 279.
- 47 Epp 81.
- 48 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 284.
- 49 O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 285.
- 50 Blackrock College, a Catholic fee-paying school at the outskirts of Dublin.
- 51 Cronin 36.
- 52 Timothy J. White, ‘Celts, Conquest, and Conflicting Identities in Ireland’, *Celtic Cultural Studies*, 2008, web, 8 April 2014, <<http://www.celtic-cultural-studies.com/papers/02/white-01.html>>.

- 53 O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 282.
54 O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 281-282.
55 Ronan Fanning, 'De Valera, Éamon ('Dev')', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* 3
(2009): 204.
56 O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 283.
57 Hopper 35.
58 O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 283.