Assoc Prof Murphy wins rave reviews with Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien


It was a “book of the week” in *The Guardian* in September and was listed as one of the “Books to Watch out for” by *The New Yorker* magazine in August 2013. More recently, the novelist Julian Gough, reviewing the book in the *New York Times* (October 18th, 2013), claimed that the editors, Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, “have done the study of Irish literature a great service,” and that the collection of stories “has the great virtue of hauling O’Brien out from under the shadow of Joyce and Beckett.” Hal Jensen, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (November 8th, 2013) also wrote of the “enduring appeal of Flann O’Brien’s short and exuberant fiction.”

Assoc Prof Murphy, Associate Dean, HASS, and Head of the Division of English, HSS, collaborated with Dr Keith Hopper (who teaches at Kellogg College, Oxford, and is a research fellow with St Mary’s University College, London) on *The Short Fiction of Flann O’Brien*. The book was officially launched in Rome during the annual International Flann O’Brien Society Conference (19-21 June 2013) in the house of the Irish ambassador, who sponsored the launch.

A leading authority on 20th and 21st Century Irish Literature, particularly the works of John Banville, Aidan Higgins and Flann O’Brien, Assoc Prof Murphy’s collaboration with Dr Hopper on the Flann O’Brien special centenary issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (2011) lead to them being approached by Dalkey Archive Press to edit the scholarly edition of O’Brien’s short fiction. The Special Centenary Issue (entitled *Flann O’Brien Centenary Essays*) won first prize in 2013 from the Flann O’Brien Society, for a full-length scholarly work on Flann O’Brien.

Flann O’Brien is the most well-known pseudonym of the postmodern Irish novelist, playwright and satirist Brian O’Nolan. A major figure of twentieth century Irish literature, O’Nolan was noted for his novels’ bizarre humour and postmodernist metafiction. He wrote under a whole host of different pseudonyms including Flann O’Brien.
pseudonyms – Flann Ó’Brien being the one he utilised to write numerous short stories and his English language novels such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*.

According to Assoc Prof Murphy, the primary reason for publishing the collection of stories was to create a scholarly resource for researchers working on Irish writing, Postmodern fiction, and/or Flann Ó’Brien. The short fiction is now available in one volume for the first time – the aim was to gather together “previously unavailable or dispersed material under one reader-friendly roof”.

The book contains three stories – “When I Met William of Orange,” “I'm Telling You No Lie” and “After Hours” – that have been reprinted in this collection for the first time, an early previously uncollected draft version of “The Martyr’s Crown” in the appendix of the book and all of O’Brien’s most important stories like “John Duffy’s Brother”, “Scenes in a Novel,” and “Donabate.”

Five Irish language stories written by O’Brien have also been newly translated by Dr. Jack Fennell (University of Limerick) and included in the book in an attempt to make some of O’Brien’s Irish language materials available in English. “We wanted to include the five Irish short stories because they offer an important insight into O’Brien’s major works in English, which he was writing at the same time.”

Having always loved literature, Assoc Prof Murphy partly credits his interest in literature to his Irish background. “I love literary fiction and Irish writers like Beckett, Joyce, O’Brien etc. have been very important shaping influences on my literary tastes. My initial post-PhD work focussed on contemporary Irish fiction so my interest in Flann O’Brien represents a stepping back – a backwards tracing of the roots that produced many of the contemporary writers; I think Flann O’Brien continues to deeply influence younger writers in Ireland.”

Assoc Prof Murphy is currently working on a book on Booker-prize-winning (2005) contemporary novelist, John Banville. Awarded the Ministry of Education (MOE) Academic Research Fund (AcRF) Tier 1 Grant to do research on the book over the next three years, his book will centre on an aesthetic analysis of John Banville work.