



Lost masterpiece restored the reputation of a genius

BRIAN O'NOLAN was born in Co Tyrone on October 5, 1911. His father, a civil servant and a rather dogmatic man, had the young Brian home educated solely in Irish until the age of 11 when he first started school proper at the Christian Brothers, in Synge St, Dublin, where the family had eventually settled.

While studying at UCD in the early 1930s, he began writing the novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a comic masterpiece that is often called an 'anti-novel' with its dizzying range of styles and characters.

O'Nolan joined the civil service after leaving UCD, but in July, 1937, on the day that he learned he had successfully completed his probationary period, his father died of a stroke, leaving O'Nolan the sole breadwinner for his nine siblings and his mother.

He began working seriously on *At Swim-Two-Birds* and was championed by Graham Greene, who was then working as a reader at the London publishers, Longmans.

Longmans published the book in 1939 — with O'Nolan using the pseudonym, Flann O'Brien — to the instant approval of his peers, including James Joyce.

Joyce said of the book and its author, "That's a real writer with a true comic spirit — a really funny book."

But almost the entire print run was destroyed when the publishers' warehouse was bombed during the London Blitz.

It was to become known in Dublin, in the years immediately after, as one of the least-read masterpieces in literary history.

At around the same time that he had begun working seriously on *At Swim-Two-Birds*, he was invited to write a column, *The Cruiskeen Lawn*, for *The Irish Times*, which he would continue, eventually adopting the pseudonym, Myles na gCopaleen, for over 20 years.

While the column earned him a certain literary notoriety — they were the source of actor Eamon Morrissey's notorious dramatic sketches about 'The Brother' — it

was often felt at the time that he was underselling his talent and that it was the work of a 'brilliant failure', who had failed to follow up his first masterpiece.

But he had written another equally brilliant and, according to many, much better book, *The Third Policeman*, but it was rejected by Longmans.

Having talked it up, he then claimed the manuscript had been lost, so unable was he to deal with the rejection.

He published *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*) (An Press Náisiúnta), in 1941; *The Hard Life*, (MacGibbon and Kee), in 1961; and *The Dalkey Archive*, (MacGibbon and Kee), in 1964, but to many they confirmed the notion of a literary giant who had squandered his talent, largely on drink.

His drinking, long an issue, was the reason used for levering him out of the civil service after almost 20 years. He died on April 1, 1966.

Amongst his possessions was discovered the manuscript for *The Third Policeman*. It was published and almost instantly acclaimed as a classic of world literature, and remains so to this day.

Joe McNamee