

JUST DOODLING

Christian Dupont considers the doodles on the cover of a notebook Flann O'Brien kept as secretary for the 1943 Cavan orphanage fire tribunal

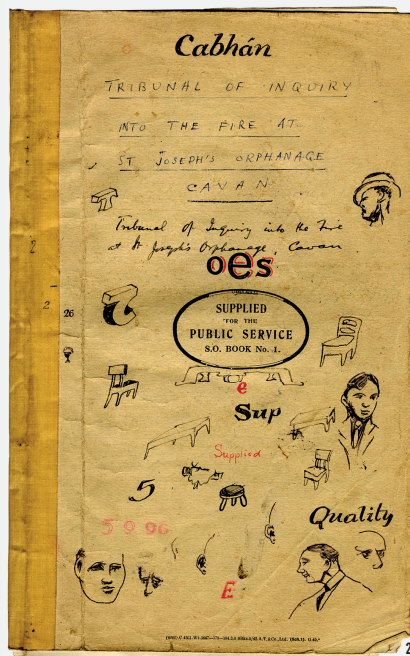


1

Just doodling? Ask Sam. Beckett often sketched odd little figures in his writing notebooks. In our manuscript for his short story 'Suite', Beckett filled several blank pages opposite the text with ant-like creatures. Out of context, one might think they were illustrations for *The Insect Play* by the Brothers Capek, or its adaptation by Flann O'Brien. Only the latter was a flop when the Gaiety Theatre staged it in 1943 and Flann was not a doodler – except on one notable occasion and notebook.

That same year, acting in his civic capacity and name, Brian Ó Nualláin served as secretary for the public tribunal charged with investigating the devastating fire that killed 35 children at the Poor Clares' orphanage in Cavan. The front and back covers of the notebook he kept are strewn with doodles of faces and hands, tables and chairs, and stylised lettering.

The concluding lines of the published report thank Ó Nualláin for his 'assiduous care and attention' and 'unceasing help'. Yet the copious doodling and contents of the notebook



2

'IF THE NUNS WERE TO BLAME, IT WOULD BE A SHAME'

itself suggest that he was subject to distraction, sketching what one presumes are caricatures of those who conducted or appeared at the hearings, and perhaps even a self-portrait. Several pages were torn out and destroyed or lost. The remaining include only scant references to the proceedings, containing for the most part quotations and statistics copied from various sources pertaining to Irish-language debates and an outline for an essay on the topic. An unpublished and incomplete typescript of some 40 pages survived alongside the notebook. Critic Carol Taaffe has observed that though 'its preoccupations are familiar from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, the tone of this manuscript

– part cultural history and sober statistical analysis, part anti-revivalist polemic – reveals O'Nolan's opinions with a clarity unusual for a writer whose voice was more often masked by the ironies of Myles na gCopaleen'. In fact, the celebrated columnist and author of the parodic *An Béal Bocht* all but abandoned writing in Irish by 1944.

Disillusioned by the politics of linguistic and cultural revivalism and despondent over the failures of his plays (*Faustus Kelly* also flopped in 1943) and rejections of his attempt at a second novel in English (*The Third Policeman* was only published after his death in 1966), Ó Nualláin was also seemingly dispirited by the tribunal's conclusions, which traced the fire to a drafty chimney flue or electrical fault but refrained from assigning blame for the otherwise avoidable loss of life.

Biographer and friend Anthony Cronin claimed that over pints in a pub after one of the hearings, Ó Nualláin and T F O'Higgins, counsel for the Electricity Supply Board and later Chief Justice and Presidential candidate, penned a sarcastic limerick:

*In Cavan there was a great fire,
Judge McCarthy was sent to inquire,
If the nuns were to blame,
It would be a shame,
So it had to be caused by a wire.*

Just doodles and rhymes, or signs of a sensitive and disturbed conscience? ■

This is the seventh in a series of articles on Burns Library and its collections that attempts to provide context for appreciating the work of Irish artists and their reception in America.

Christian Dupont is Burns Librarian and Associate University Librarian for Special Collections at Boston College, USA.

1 SAMUEL BECKETT (1906–1989) detail of doodling in 'Suite', 1946, facing page [17] [11.5x6.5cm] Samuel Beckett Collection, John J Burns Library, MS.1991.001, Box 11, folder 9. Reproduced with permission of Samuel Beckett Estate

2 BRIAN O'NOLAN (1911–1966) front cover of notebook titled 'Tribunal of Inquiry into the Fire at St. Joseph's Orphanage Cavan', [April, 1943] [21.5x31.5 cm] Flann O'Brien Papers, John J. Burns Library, MS.1997.027, Box 5, folder 16