

# LOOKING FOR DE SELBY

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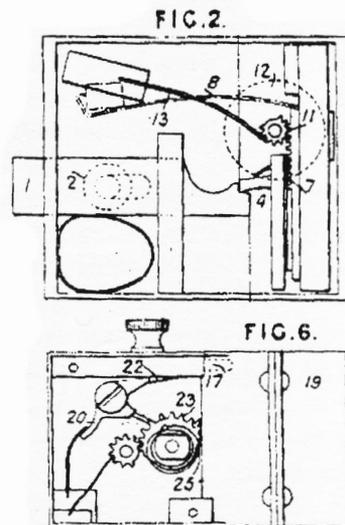
# LOOKING FOR DE SELBY

*Who was this fictional character?*

*Upon whom was he based?*

*Where did the author find him?*

*These and other interesting  
(if unimportant)  
questions answered.*



*Necessary To Know*

DE SELBY,  
a fictional character appearing in  
*The Dalkey Archive* and *The Third Policeman*,  
novels by

FLANN O'BRIEN,  
an Irish writer, now dead.

DALKEY,  
a seaside town eight miles south east of Dublin.

*“Might as well introduce myself”, the invalid said.  
“My name’s De Selby”.*

AND SO, not too many pages into *The Dalkey Archive*, we meet him. Flann O’Brien’s heroes Shaughnessy and Hackett have just met him themselves. They have seen him, an injured man coming back from White Rock beach on Dalkey’s Vico Road. And they are helping him to his house.

And so, naturally enough, he tells them his name. But that is all. He doesn’t tell them, or indeed us, who he is, or where he has come from. And neither does the author.

So who is this De Selby? And where did he come from?

As a fictional character he must have come from somewhere. That class of individual doesn’t just spring from nowhere. Particularly in Irish fiction, and particularly with that particular writer. Flann O’Brien was not the sort of writer to create his characters from scratch, if indeed to create them at all! Many are easily identified. Friends of his student days had appeared as characters in other works. Niall Sheridan was *Brinsley* in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. And the character *Kerrigan* in the same book was based on Niall Montgomery. In *The Hard Life* the character of *Father Fahrt SJ* was based on a real life Jesuit, Dr Ingram.

But De Selby? He seems to have sprung from nowhere, this savant, philosopher, scientist, master of all arts, this samildanach!

Now of course there is a thing about major characters in fiction such as De Selby, in that they are harder to pin down than those with walk on parts. The writer has invested more effort in them, the creative process has obscured and blended, mixed n’ matched elements from many sources. But nonetheless, De Selby, like them all, he has his roots.

So where to look?

There are several headings under which we can explore. We can poke about both within the books, and within the personal life of the author.

So first, perhaps, within the book, what clues here? Well here we are told about the residence of De Selby, the character of De Selby, the personal appearance of the man, plus his ideas and beliefs.

So perhaps straight away it might be an idea to look at that residence of De Selby. If we could identify that, connect it with a real person who lived there in that era? Would it were so simple! But anyway De Selby without doubt lived in Dalkey, that small seaside town south of Dublin city. And precisely he lived on the hill above the Vico Road, the scenic route which skirts about Killiney Bay.

*“There was a tiny gate discernible  
in the rough railing bounding the road ...  
a narrow but smooth enough pathway fastidiously picked its way  
upward through tree trunks and shrubs.”*

This tiny gate was, according to O’Brien, on the far side of the road and almost opposite “the gap which gave access to a rough downhill path towards the railway far below”.

So, a field trip to the location. And on this trip the visitor to the Vico Road will notice that there is no such ‘tiny gate’ in the railings that leads to any house along here. There is a gateway, certainly, but this leads onto a public pathway which goes up towards what is known as The Green Road. Another gateway in the railings, not tiny, leads to a modern house that was not there in the period when O’Brien was writing the book.

In fact, the visitor will see, all the way back down towards Dalkey, or indeed in the other direction, there are no such gates in railings as described by O’Brien. The entranceways to houses are set in walls. In any event ‘tiny’ gates have never been favoured by those who are rich enough to live in this location. This is seriously vulgar/conspicuous consumption territory, and it probably always has been!

So, we learn from this? Well, seeing as how O’Brien was precise about the entranceway to the beach being set ‘in a low wall’, it must be assumed that, in carrying forward this precision, he was creating a fictional house for De Selby. This blending of real precision with fictional precision is a simple writer’s trick.

So, a fictional house. Or, at least, a fictional entranceway to a house that may or may not be fictional. To establish that, dig deeper. It is indeed a fact that O’Brien did have friends living in this locality. Niall Sheridan lived here in Dalkey, as did O’Brien’s solicitor. So common-sense tells us that the writer did visit houses here. Friends have friends, and God knows how many houses a seriously drinking man will enter on the social round. And God also knows, though no one else does, how all these houses blend in the writer’s mind.

For the purposes of his *Dalkey Archive* plot it was enough for O’Brien to establish that De Selby, his fictional character, did live somewhere overlooking the Vico Road. In any old house, really. So, if we could identify some real person, some De Selby like character who in fact did live overlooking Vico in the particular era, obviously then we would have to look carefully at that person.

Some De Selby-like character? To be frank it must be admitted that the fictional De Selby is, in fact, a right pain in the neck, a complete clever dick! He knows everything about everything. He is precise, pompous and pedantic. But then no doubt he shares many of these attributes with us Irish folk, and not just folk of that period.

It must also be admitted that De Selby would have inherited many of his less endearing characteristics from his writer, a master of pub pedantry if ever there was one!

But the bottom line? Is this... in his personal attributes, there's nothing particular about De Selby.

This is a problem, so, dig yet deeper. Examine activity and occupation. Examine and we find that one particular attribute is the fact that De Selby is an inventor. And, in addition to that, he is an inventor of independent means. Admittedly O'Brien does have him as being the son of a member of the DMP! This obviously can be dismissed as based more on the strange belief, in the thirties/forties, that there was something inherently funny about the old DMP! Incidentally, the fact that O'Brien uses the same initials to identify De Selby's chemical substance, apart from being a poor enough pun, does give us some inkling as to the date at which the book was written. More of this matter anon.

In the meantime, in the summary then, from the internal evidence in the book, all we can really learn is that De Selby is an inventor of independent means living somewhere over the Vico Road. Not much, indeed, but it is really all we can learn from that source. As noted, his conversation is really a distillation of that of many pub bores. Erudite pub bores, but bores nonetheless! It tells us little.

So to get closer to De Selby, we must look at that second source mentioned at the start, the writer as source.

The questions... Where in his life could he have met a De Selby like character? When and how did this character become 'fictionalised', and when did O'Brien start the creative process which gave him existence as a persona?

This is not easy. Flann O'Brien was not an organised writer, not in the sense that he wrote one thing, forgot about it, and then went on to the next. The exigencies of the drinking lifestyle, not to mention the fact that he held down a fairly serious 'day job' as a Civil Servant, these did not encourage the regular production of long fictional works, one after t'other, in methodical production line fashion.

A brief look at his life and at the chronology of his work may very well help at this point.

*The writer ... and his books.*

FLANN O'BRIEN was born Brian O'Nolan in 1911 in County Tyrone, the son of a Customs Officer. His father's work, and promotions, brought him in 1927 to Blackrock in County Dublin. Michael Nolan, by now a Revenue Commissioner, sent his son to the nearby Blackrock College. He entered UCD in 1929, became a 'college personality' and, writing as Brother Barnabas, contributed to and was sometime editor of a college magazine. He played billiards and drank in pubs and was a leading heckler/speaker in the debating society. This academic career was appropriately rewarded by a mediocre degree in 1932.

The following year O'Brien went to Germany for an extended visit. This turned out to be one of those periods which, remaining obscure, seem to be a necessary and common factor in all writers' lives. Writers need secrets and mysteries about themselves. They need to hide something both from themselves and their public. The lies; obfuscations and distortions that result from secret mystery periods serve to protect the truth.

But, whatever about all that, the point is that O'Brien's stories of his alleged doings in Germany have not stood up to the test of reality.

On his return to Dublin he re-entered College, he studied, he wrote and, by 1935, he had largely completed his most noted work, *At Swim-Two-Birds*. He then entered the Civil Service and that particular book was not published until 1939.

It was his father's death in 1937, and the fact that this left O'Brien as largely responsible for the finances of the rest of the family, that prompted him to resume his writing career in an effort to increase his income.

However, sometime before the publication of *At Swim-Two-Birds* O'Brien had also started writing *The Third Policeman*. This is the book in which the character De Selby first appears.

*The Third Policeman* was rejected by publishers in 1940 and O'Brien reacted by himself rejecting the manuscript. In fact he made up and spread bizarre rumours that the manuscript, touted by himself as a forthcoming 'great novel', had been lost in a pub!

O'Brien's Irish-language work *An Béal Bocht* was then published in 1941 although, in fact, it had been written in the early thirties.

This pattern was to repeat itself, lengthy periods elapsing between the writing of a work and its eventual publication. For almost twenty years nothing more was heard of *The Third Policeman*. O'Brien developed his twin careers as newspaper columnist and Civil Servant. In *The Irish Times* he was *Myles na*

gCopaleen, and in the Civil Service he rose to a quite high level. In this period he also developed his taste for alcohol, spending a serious amount of time in pubs and becoming part of the general Dublin drinking milieu.

In 1954 he was sacked from the Civil Service and, to compensate financially, he increased his journalistic output. He also obviously remembered the asset of the unpublished works and, around 1958, made efforts to revive their prospects. He showed material to various literary contacts but this process was interrupted when a publisher, in 1960, brought out a new edition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. This proved to be successful and, even before it emerged, the prospect of imminent publication had encouraged O'Brien to start a new work, *The Hard Life*. This too proved successful and O'Brien, or so he said, 'started' to write *The Dalkey Archive*.

Of course he did no such thing. For all intents and purposes *The Dalkey Archive* and *The Third Policeman* have a common origin in an earlier period of O'Brien's life. Apart from the internal similarities and themes in the two works, O'Brien is recorded as saying, when asked in the fifties about *The Third Policeman*, that he was rewriting it in a different format. We can gather from this that he was in fact tinkering about with the book that became *The Dalkey Archive*. (Anthony Cronin, in his *Dead as Doornails*, makes it fairly clear that *The Dalkey Archive* was written and abandoned pre-1940).

*The Dalkey Archive* was published in 1964, and *The Third Policeman* was published, eighteen months after the author's death, in 1967.

So, undoubtedly, the genesis of both books lie in the nineteen thirties. They were probably once the same book. And a book that was written, largely then, based on experiences and perceptions gained in those years. The philosophising, the playing of intellectual games and the measuring of idea against idea, all these are done in the style of young intellectuals testing themselves against their peers. Whilst all the while wondering who is going to buy the next pint!

So, where does all this get us in the search for De Selby? In summary, what have we learned?

We have noted that the only thing we can learn about him from the book itself is that he was an inventor, of independent means, living above Vico Road. And secondly, from the evidence of O'Brien's life and writing habits, we know that the character was formed in the nineteen thirties.

So far, so little!

But is there any other route?

*That name ... De Selby.*

YES, WHAT ABOUT THAT? Unfortunately examination here seems to show on the surface that not only as a character does De Selby seem to have appeared from nowhere, but as a name too.

What was this name, De Selby? From where did the writer get it? The phone book? Was there some famous De Selby person about the place at the time, someone who might have brought the name into parlance?

A glance at reference books throws up the name Selby in various contexts. There is of course the Yorkshire town of Selby, famous for its Benedictine Abbey, but as a placename Selby doesn't feature elsewhere, particularly in an Irish context.

As a personal name Selby appears to have Danish origins, and is said to have been strong in Britain in the Buckinghamshire area. Whatever about that it was certainly strongly represented in the names of Victorian British writers.

Most noted of these, nowadays, is Prideaux John Selby, ornithologist and all-purpose naturalist, responsible for a definitive work on Parrots, not to mention another one on Pigeons!

Many other Selby-named writers are less remembered. There was Angelica Selby, for example, a novelist, author of *'In The Sunlight'* published in 1890. And there was Charles Selby, another writer around the same period. In the 1880's he wrote dozens and dozens of theatrical pieces, burlesques, farces, not to mention various burlettas! This particular Selby's work had titles such as *'Catching An Heiress'* and *'My Aunt's Husband'* and does not seem a likely source of inspiration for Flann O'Brien. The same can be said of another writer of the period, Thomas Gunn Selby, a commentator on biblical matters, he seems a bit conservative to have been a source. Watford Daking Selby, editor of *'The Robberies of Chaucer'*, somehow doesn't seem to be a contender either.

However we do also have Arthur Laidlaw Selby, author of *'Elementary Mechanics of Solids and Fluids'*, published in 1893. This is a title that could very well have been on the fictional De Selby's shelves. As could another, by Francis Guy Selby, *'the Metaphysic of Aristotle'*, published in 1901. And, excitingly, the same Francis Guy had some sort of Irish connection or interest, in that he was an authority on Edmund Burke, editing his speeches and so forth, Another aspect of F. G. Selby worth noting is that he was on the National Antarctic Expedition of 1901 to 1904, and produced a 1908 paper on his tidal observations. In this context we remember that the fictional De Selby was much concerned with