

2024

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### Recommended Citation

Shaffer, Brian W. (2024) "The Bloomsday Book's Fortunes in Its Native Land," *James Joyce Literary Supplement*: Vol. 37: Iss. 1, Article 13.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jjls/vol37/iss1/13>

## The Bloomsday Book's Fortunes in Its Native Land

JOHN MCCOURT, *Consuming Joyce: 100 Years of Ulysses in Ireland*.

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

\$90.00 hardback; \$26.95 paperback.

**Brian W. Shaffer**

In the June 15, 2022 issue of *The Irish Times*, a headline read: “Pro Cathedral to celebrate works by Joyce once banned by Vatican: First ever Bloomsday readings of James Joyce planned for Dublin’s main Catholic Church.” While on its face unremarkable, this anodyne headline reflects a dramatic about-face from decades of neglect and hostility accorded Joyce’s works by the Church and its adherents in Ireland. The evolving story of the reception of *Ulysses* in its native land is the subject of John McCourt’s well-researched and engagingly written book, *Consuming Joyce: 100 Years of Ulysses in Ireland*. Given this topic’s evident importance, it has received surprisingly little sustained attention. McCourt’s is the first comprehensive study of *Ulysses*’s fortunes in Ireland to draw upon the novel’s treatment in Irish schools, universities, churches, government ministries, newspapers, theatres, and popular culture (3). The book opens with the observation that “*Ulysses* and the Irish state are exact contemporaries” and that “as Irish society grew and developed down through the decades so did our acceptance and understanding of Joyce’s novel” (3). What follows is not merely an investigation of how the Irish read, misread, or failed to read *Ulysses* over the past century but an exploration of how *Ulysses* in turn read Irish history, probing its political and religious provincialism and challenging its cultural assumptions.

*Consuming Joyce* treats its subject chronologically, devoting ten chapters to telling its century-long story. In an opening chapter on Joyce’s reception in Ireland before *Ulysses*, McCourt rehearses the now familiar tale of the author’s early Dublin years, when he distanced himself from the literary revival associated with Yeats and Gregory, rejected the Roman Catholic Church, and burnt a number of bridges with family members, friends, and perceived rivals. The chapter also treats the anemic Irish consumption and reception of Joyce’s pre-*Ulysses* works, *Dubliners* and *Portrait*, the first of which was largely ignored while the latter was largely reviled for its unsparing and brutal realism. The upshot of McCourt’s argument here is that, given the poor reception faced by Joyce and his works in Ireland, “by the time *Ulysses* was finally published, mainstream Irish commentators were but little disposed to greet it with sympathy” and instead dismissed it as morally bankrupt and reflecting negatively on its homeland (11). Indeed, the dominant response to *Ulysses* in Ireland was to attack it as “anti-Catholic” (29), a spiritually corrupt work “at odds with the Free State’s increasingly hegemonic Catholic ethos” (49). After treating the well-known legal jeopardy in which *Ulysses* initially found itself, especially in the United States, McCourt turns his attention over the rest of the book to his central theme: the Bloomsday Book’s century-long wrangling with Irish cultural history.

McCourt’s discussion of *Ulysses*’s reception in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s centers on the novel’s challenges to the entrenched “Catholic-Nationalist” dogma in the early years of the Free State. Although literally revolutionary in achieving its aim of bringing British rule to an end in 26 of the island’s 32 counties, the Irish Free State soon revealed its own cultural insularity and repressive tendencies, establishing a “Committee of Inquiry into Evil Literature” (1925) and passing a “Censorship of Publications” act (1929). While never explicitly banned in Ireland (although not openly

for sale there until the late-1960s), *Ulysses* in these early years could claim only a tiny “enlightened minority” of followers while most Irish people, “if they acknowledged it at all, did so with indifference, resentment or downright hostility” (21). This antipathy was due to *Ulysses* being “a manifesto for an Ireland radically different from the Free State” (21), a “liberating space, albeit of the imagination,” that “could be read as a hopeful foundational text that pitched itself not only against British domination in Ireland but also against the narrowly conservative Catholic Irish nationalist model” that predominated (42). The novel encountered even stronger headwinds in the 1930s than in the 1920s, according to McCourt, owing to the new nation’s deepening socioeconomic and religious conservatism—a conservatism associated with the rise of politician Eamon de Valera and culture critic Daniel Corkery. Neither de Valera nor Corkery had much use for the Ireland represented in Joyce’s avantgarde, hyper-realistic, urban epic—or for its iconoclastic, self-exiled, “Europeanized” author. (McCourt reminds us that the antipathy between Joyce and de Valera worked in both directions: *Finnegans Wake* sports a pun on the politician’s name, “the devil era” [243]).

McCourt’s discussion of *Ulysses* in the 1940s—the decade following Joyce’s death in 1941 and coinciding with Ireland’s isolationist “neutrality” during “The Emergency”—reveals early glimmers of Joyce’s newfound legitimacy, even cult status, in Ireland. By the time of Joyce’s death, *Dubliners* and *Portrait* were accepted as major literary works even if *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* remained controversial, whether praised or damned, both books being more talked about than read. The mainstream Irish newspapers “gave Joyce’s death prominent coverage but seemed at a loss as to whether the country had lost a Rasputin-like figure, an oddball, an anti-Christ, a writer of genius or a combination of all of these,” McCourt writes (76). The one exception to this waffling among the country’s major newspapers was the culturally liberal, historically Protestant and Unionist *Irish Times*, which was unreservedly adulatory toward *Ulysses* and even supported Joyce’s earlier, unsuccessful nomination for a Nobel Prize in Literature. Not surprisingly, this nomination failed to gain the support of the culturally conservative Irish government, which also declined to send any official representative to Joyce’s funeral in Zurich, a decision reportedly made by de Valera himself. In a further irony, it was a British consular official, not any governmental representative from Ireland, who attended and spoke at Joyce’s funeral, observing that, “whatever be the rights and wrongs of the relations between England and Ireland, I know Ireland will continue to take the finest and most ironical of revenges on us; she will go on giving us great men of letters” (82). McCourt acerbically adds that while a British representative was eulogizing Joyce at his funeral, back in Ireland “de Valera’s officials in the Department of External Affairs were fretting about whether or not Joyce had died a Catholic” (82). Perhaps predictably, given Joyce’s open break with the Roman Church, neither Belvedere College nor Clongowes Wood College, the two Jesuit schools he attended, “published a word” upon the passing of their best-known alumnus (83) (although by 2009 the library at Clongowes would bear the name “James Joyce Library”). Although “Irish Officialdom” (98) passed over Joyce’s death in silence, key Irish writers of the time—from Brian O’Nolan to Patrick Kavanagh to Elizabeth Bowen—viewed his passing as a major milestone in Irish letters.

In a chapter devoted to the 1950s, McCourt documents the beginning of what later came to be known as the “Joyce Industry,” entailing the author’s canonization in the American academy, most clearly signaled by the arrival in Ireland of Richard Ellmann to research and write his as yet unsurpassed (if in other respects dated) life of Joyce. By contrast with American scholars at this time, Irish Joyceans “remained a marginal presence,” and the Irish academy continued to ignore his works (130). McCourt portrays early Irish Joyce criticism as both living in the shadow of American scholarship yet as defensively resenting and belittling it as inadequately knowledgeable about the author’s Irish contexts, which were presumed to be accessible only to natives. Worse, McCourt adds, many Irish scholars “felt that generously funded Americans were hogging the field and were establishing the rules for scholarly Joyce combat” (130). McCourt also treats here the 1954

inauguration of the other major development in Ireland's consumption of *Ulysses* during this decade: the annual Bloomsday celebration and pilgrimage, which aimed to retrace Stephen's and Bloom's June 16, 1904 perambulations around Dublin in real time. Things did not go as hoped, however; the pilgrimage, in that year led by the fierce-drinking O'Nolan and Kavanagh, got bogged down by the various pub visits on the itinerary, bringing the day's odyssey to a premature and drunken conclusion.

By the 1960s and 1970s, modernizing trends taking place in Ireland—influenced, among other things, by the end of de Valera's reign as Taoiseach, by Irish television, which “opened the way for greater public discussion of issues long considered taboo” (137), and the partial relaxation of government censorship—together “facilitated a growing appreciation of Joyce and *Ulysses*, which was being read by a minority, impatient for change, as a beacon of a different, more liberal Ireland” (138). Although Joyce's works were excluded from the school curriculum and continued to be attacked on religious grounds, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a number of successful stage and film adaptations of Joyce's works; the rise of Joyce's use to promote commerce and tourism; the Yeats-like campaign to exhume Joyce's body abroad for reinterment in Ireland; the purchase of the Martello Tower in Sandycove (where *Ulysses* opens) to house a Joyce museum; and the publication of the first paperback edition of *Ulysses* (prior to this, one was compelled to carry the book about town in a brown paper bag).

It would take *Ulysses* 60 years to be accorded its due in Ireland—Americans, at least on the academic front, were there first—but by 1982 the thaw had finally arrived: “Joyce's centenary proved to be the turning point in his reception in Ireland” (184). Centenary events signaling Joyce's newfound prestige in Ireland included exhibits in the National Library and Hugh Lane Gallery; concerts in the National Concert Hall; a 30-hour RTE radio broadcast of *Ulysses* in its entirety; the commissioning of the first Joyce statue in Ireland, in Dublin's Stephen's Green; the printing of a commemorative Joyce postage stamp; and the planning of a new James Joyce Centre by scholar-activist David Norris, who by this point could quip, without exaggeration, that “Bloomsday is to Dublin what Christmas is to Bethlehem” (204). Even Dublin City Council joined in the effort, decorating the city's streets on Bloomsday with flags and bunting “in a similar manner to what was usually done for St. Patrick's Day or an All-Ireland final” (192). 1982 also saw the largest Joyce symposium yet—with nearly 700 participants—that included a reception at Dublin Castle hosted by the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. As gratifying as the above examples of Ireland's newfound zeal for *Ulysses* may have been, much of the hype surrounding Joyce's book in its author's centenary year, according to McCourt, had as much to do with its commercial uses—selling Ireland abroad and selling Irish goods within—as with any genuine literary appreciation.

The Celtic Tiger years, named for the unprecedented inward flows of global capital that transformed the Irish economy, saw the fetishization of *Ulysses* reach even higher levels. As McCourt puts it, “the post-nationalist, anti-Catholic, pro-European (but more crucially pro-capital) Ireland of the 1990s—proudly the world's most global economy—found the perfect symbol in Joyce, who had earlier rejected so many of the pieties that the country was now finally beginning to question and demolish” (210). The honors accorded Joyce this decade continued apace: in 1993 alone, for example, Joyce was put on the 10-pound Irish banknote and had a new bridge spanning the Liffey named after him. It now seemed that Joyce's star shined as brightly as any Irish literary figure, Yeats included. As McCourt, quoting scholar Barry McCrea, put it, *Ulysses* “suddenly became almost Ireland's emblematic national text, a chief cultural icon of Dublin, a symbol, like the Book of Kells, of Irishness itself” (213). McCourt also quotes a newspaper article of the time that gushed, “After Guinness and perhaps U2, James Joyce is our most famous export. He put Dublin on the world map” (233). Just about the only thing denied Joyce in Ireland at this time, oddly enough, was a secure place in its school curriculum, where his works remained largely absent.

A final chapter, “Millennial Joyce,” explores Joyce’s recent “arrival at the pinnacle of the Irish cultural firmament” (249). McCourt’s starting point here is the implosion of Church legitimacy and authority in Ireland, hastened by the Ryan Report (2009) and other government inquiries that catalogued in lurid detail decades of clerical abuse. Ironically, it is only during this time that Joyce’s work began to receive positive attention in Church organs. In 2004, for example, “a special Joyce issue of the Jesuit periodical *Studies* paid homage to Joyce as the most famous product of Irish Jesuit education” (241). Like the Church, the Irish government finally made an overdue appearance at the Joyce party. Having eschewed recognition of Joyce for decades, it was now spending millions of dollars procuring rare Joyce manuscripts and typescripts for its national library, and even named “a weaponized Irish Naval Service patrol ship” in his honor (260). The most important development since the turn of the millennium, however, is that Ireland, replacing the U.S., finally became the global center of Joyce scholarship.

John McCourt is the author of numerous other books on Joyce, most notably an illuminating study of the author’s Trieste years. We are fortunate indeed that McCourt elected to devote his considerable scholarly acumen to crafting this revealing, comprehensive, century-long story of *Ulysses*’s fortunes in its native land—a story as much about Irish cultural history as about Joyce’s superlatively controversial and influential text. As McCourt concludes, “Far from being consumed, *Ulysses* is an enduringly rewarding work of literature and an extraordinarily rich compendium of life and language that will give at least as much to Ireland and the world in its second hundred years of life as it gave in its first” (264).

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