

BOOK REVIEW

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The Commodification of James Joyce

Consuming Joyce: A Hundred Years of Ulysses in Ireland,
by John McCourt, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 288 pp.
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Since its publication in 1922, James Joyce's *Ulysses* has been mined by critics more than it has been read by the general public. For several decades academic work on the novel was largely carried out by American scholars, much to the chagrin of Irish academics, and lambasted by everyone from the Irish press and politicians to Joyce family members, and perhaps most of all by the Roman Catholic establishment, which in the years after the formation of the Irish Free State operated almost as an arm of the government.

John McCourt's highly readable monograph study describes, decade by decade, the reception not only of *Ulysses*, but also of Joyce's other works in Ireland, and analyses the growing commodification of Joyce, charting the growth of the 'Joyce industry' from the early Bloomsday celebrations held by half a dozen enthusiasts to the modern day festivities attended by thousands of revellers, most of whom are happy to admit that they have barely opened Joyce's *magnum opus*. McCourt focuses on three aspects of the consumption of *Ulysses*: book sales and the early difficulty of obtaining copies of the book; scholarly exploration and critical reception at home and abroad; the use and abuse of Joyce and his work by vested interests, including the Irish government, private businesses, and the Irish tourist industry. A fourth and hitherto under-researched thesis is that Joyce's self-imposed exile is central to any interpretation of *Ulysses*. McCourt argues that Joyce was influenced by his life away from Ireland, especially in Trieste, much more than is acknowledged by most Joyceans.

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Though banned in the United Kingdom and the United States, *Ulysses* was never banned in Ireland. Indeed, the only work of Joyce to be banned in Ireland was *Stephen Hero*, the posthumously published version of what was to become *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which fell foul of the censors from 1944 to 1951, the year in which the Censorship of Publications Board banned 539 texts out of the 717 over which they cast their disapproving eye.

In 1924, two years after its publication, W. B. Yeats, who described *Ulysses* as a work of genius, told Ezra Pound that copies were on sale in Ireland, though booksellers were reluctant to advertise their stock. The Irish Bookshop in Dublin had a copy in the window, but this was unusual. This is hardly surprising as the vilification of Joyce and *Ulysses* was vitriolic, even hysterical at the time and later, for example: “Unspeakable heap of printed filth” (*The Nation*), “Irish scum” and “filth” (*Catholic Bulletin*, the latter comment from a Jesuit from Clongowes Wood College, Joyce’s first school). That was the kind of backlash that *Ulysses* faced, and McCourt cites many instances of Irish pearl-clutching during the 1920s, including those from across the Atlantic, e.g. in the Irish-American newspaper *The Advocate*, where the novel was described as a “cesspool”.

Ten per cent of buyers of the first edition of *Ulysses* were Irish, but some of those closest to Joyce were embarrassed to own a copy. His aunt Josephine, of whom Joyce was fond, locked her copy in a drawer and burned letters, but others were supportive. Apart from literary figures like Eliot and Pound, the great Irish tenor John McCormack, who had bought a first edition (Joyce also gave him a signed copy in Paris in 1922), defended the book repeatedly. McCormack was made a Papal Knight in 1928, and a Privy Chamberlain the following year, and this shows the ambivalence with which Joyce and his work were met by the hierarchy of the wider Church. It is remarkable that as late as 1963, Eason’s bookshop in Dublin was selling *Ulysses* wrapped in brown paper, but in 1989 Irish President Patrick Hillery, on a visit to the Vatican, presented the library of St. Isidore’s Franciscan college with a three-volume facsimile copy of the book.

Joyce had many influential and generous friends, not least of whom was the New York lawyer John Quinn, who regularly funded *The Little Review*, a literary magazine that serialized *Ulysses*, and fought the censors hard on Joyce’s behalf, as he had done for Lady Gregory’s touring company when it ran into trouble in the US for producing the work of John Millington Synge. Quinn championed several Irish writers, and was ready to help Joyce in any way he could, including money for the treatment of Joyce’s eye condition. Otherwise, *Ulysses* was vilified both by the Irish community and powerful censors like the notorious John S. Sumner, vice secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, whose 1921 trial saw the censoring of *The Little Review*’s *Ulysses* chapters. It was not until Judge John M. Woolsey’s landmark 1932 ruling that the book was not obscene that *Ulysses* was free.

McCourt follows the reception of *Ulysses* more in terms of its critical reception among scholars, especially in the United States, where academics soon took the lead in Joyce studies. Time and again, American universities acquired Joyce's manuscripts when they could have been bought by Irish institutions. In 1930, in the *Irish Statesman*, Frank O'Conner wrote that Joyce was, "a writer to be studied rather than read", which reflected the fact that the general reading public were simply not interested in ploughing through the huge and difficult volume. McCourt cites umpteen examples of both praise for *Ulysses* among (mostly American) academics, and obloquy heaped upon the work by (mostly Irish) churchmen, politicians, and journalists afraid of provoking the ire of the shadow state, which the Roman Catholic Church seemed to have become in Ireland. When Joyce died in 1941, his friend Mary Colum was unable to find a priest to say a mass for Joyce, and Eamon DeValera was against sending an Irish official to Joyce's funeral in Zürich. Lord Derwent, the British Minister to Bern, gave an admiring and generous speech at the graveside, but it would be a mistake to see irony in this; Joyce had many admirers as well as detractors in England, and had been awarded £100 from the Royal Literary Fund as early as 1916.

Richard Ellmann's magisterial Joyce biography was met with some hostility from Irish Joyceans when it appeared in 1959. L. A. Strong saw "those GI's of Joycean scholarship, the footslogging Americans in search of D.Ph's". It seemed that in Ireland writers interested in Joyce preferred to publish memoirs rather than academic studies, and while these books are enlightening, the academic heavy lifting was done in the United States. McCourt pays tribute to the work of American Joyceans without omitting that there was a steady increase in Irish academic interest. He suggests that Irish academics were perhaps somewhat intimidated and irked by the groundbreaking work being done across the Atlantic.

It was in the 1960s that Joyce finally began to be better appreciated in Ireland. Throughout that decade and into the 1970s, successful adaptations, on screen and on stage, were met with enthusiasm, and the late 1960s saw academic symposia discussing Joyce seriously, although the efforts of scholars were not always welcomed. In 1962 in New York, Mary Manning said, "Criticism in this field is no longer criticism; it is vivisection". It was an untypical view, especially stateside, but there had always existed, and will always exist, a view that Joyce's work should be simply read rather than analysed. Don't dissect it to understand it, some say, but McCourt argues that you simply have to. To get the most out of reading *Ulysses*, a knowledge of Irish history, Irish idiom, and Irish life is required. Joyce paid his readers the ultimate compliment of not condescending to them. He required intelligence and education from his readers, and those that apply both are rewarded most.

The commercialization of Joyce—what has become known as the Joyce Industry—is an element of his popularization, and McCourt takes the view that while sometimes

crass, no publicity is bad publicity. The Martello Tower in Sandycove was opened in 1962, thanks to donations by John Huston and the support of T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett and others, and it became the focal point for Bloomsday celebrations until the James Joyce Centre finally acquired its North Great George St. premises in 1982.

Joyce's rehabilitation was not seamless, and Joseph Strick's 1966 film adaptation of *Ulysses* was banned in 1968 amid sometimes hysterical criticism. The ban in Ireland was lifted in 2000. Nevertheless, Joyce's status was finally being recognised, and his tourist potential was increasingly exploited. McCourt sees Joyce's 100th birthday celebrations as the turning point in Dublin's and Ireland's acceptance of their controversial son. Although no statue was erected, American Express paid for a bust in St. Stephen's Green. The ceremony was not attended by Joyce's increasingly litigious and notoriously bad-humoured grandson, Stephen, whose many grumpy, mean-spirited shenanigans are simply laid out by McCourt throughout the book with an air of weary resignation rather than rancour. Bunting was put out above the streets, and the Irish Department of Foreign affairs released £30,000 to fund posters, films and lectures abroad. The Joyce industry was born. A second bust, to be displayed in University College, was paid for by Royal Tara China from Galway, Nora Joyce's birthplace. Perhaps the clearest sign of Ireland making its peace with James Joyce was when Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Charles Haughey hosted a birthday reception in Dublin Castle, at which the literary, cultural and political great and good were in attendance (including, surprisingly, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel).

Apart from American Express, Irish companies have sponsored Joyce-associated events and artworks, including Guinness, which commissioned twelve artworks from Gerald Davis for the *Wine of the Country* exhibition. Other firms have jumped on the Joyce bandwagon with less taste, but the celebration of Joyce remains generally joyous and harmless (Bloom's Hotel, the Anna Livia Departure Lounge, Dublin Airport, an Irish Ferries ship named *Ulysses*). In 1987, an idea for a Bloom's Pillar was mercifully rejected, but in 1990, Marjorie Fitzgibbon's Joyce statue, wistful and with his trademark cane, appeared in North Earl Street and gave rise to the now famous Dublin penchant for giving commemorative works amusing titles. The statue was locally named *The Prick with the stick*, and the Anna Livia pool and fountain, moved from O'Connell Street to make way for the Spire, is known variously as *The Floozy in the Jacuzzi*, *Bidet Mulligan*, *Viagra Falls*, and *The Hoor* (i.e. whore, pronounced *hoower*) *in the Sewer*. In 1997, An Bord Fáilte (Irish Tourist Board) announced that Joyce's "presence is central to their marketing strategies", and while some have decried what they see as the tasteless commercialization of the great author, others are less inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth. John Daly, in 1988, described Joyce as the "love-child of Michael Collins and Jack Charlton", a quote which sums up the ambivalent attitude to Joyce held by the Irish, a people well able to make fun of themselves.

Buildings associated with Joyce have been marked by plaques, and some might wonder why. Leopold Bloom's fictional birthplace, 52 Upper Clanbrassil Street, has a plaque on its wall commemorating an event that never took place. The plaque outside Joyce's birthplace in Rathgar certainly makes sense, but there is a tendency to take these things too far. Some Joyceans, including Professor McCourt, were upset to say the least when it was announced in 2021 that the building at 15 Usher's Island, where Joyce's *The Dead* is set, was to be redeveloped as a backpackers' hostel. The building was rented by Joyce's great aunts, and Joyce visited them often, but in recent years the place has fallen into disrepair, and the planning authorities decided to allow the redevelopment as the best way to preserve the building, whose structure will remain unaltered. By the time Joyce left Ireland, his family had inhabited no fewer than twelve houses. If Joyceans were to preserve each and every one of them, a substantial property portfolio would have to be looked after. Perhaps, in twenty or thirty years, the Usher's Island house will again come up on the market, and a benefactor will fund its restoration as a Joyce museum.

McCourt argues that "Joyce could simply not have been Joyce if he had stayed in Ireland". Escaping from the suffocating parochialism of Edwardian Ireland (an image that is perhaps over-egged), Joyce embraced continental Europe as his real home. This was especially so during his years in Trieste and Paris, where he formed many real and lasting friendships, e.g. with Italo Svevo (one possible inspiration, along with Alfred Hunter and Leopoldo Popper, for the character of Leopold Bloom) and Paul Léon. Joyce's sister Eva claimed that her brother often said that he would have liked to return, but McCourt argues that Joyce's life had moved on so far that he could never have returned to the place he felt had spurned him.

To sum up, McCourt's *Consuming Joyce: A Hundred Years of Ulysses in Ireland* is a welcome addition to Joyce studies, and proves that the Joycean mine is nowhere near exhausted. Joyce famously joked that *Ulysses* would keep the professors busy for a hundred years. In that, he was conservative in his estimate. This monograph about his major novel, highly readable, erudite but with a light touch, full of anecdotes old and new, should find a ready home on the bookshelves of all Joyceans.

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