

DUBLIN LITERARY PUB CRAWL

**RICK
STEVE
RECOMMENDS
2013**



The story of Dublin pubs and the writers they served

Colm Quilligan



INTRODUCTION

There they were as if I had never left them; in their sweet and stately order around the bay – Bray Head, The Sugar Loaf, The Two Rock, The Three Rock, Kippure, the king of them all.

Brendan Behan: *Borstal Boy*

SOME CONSTANTS of the *fair city* remain. The ‘plum blue’ hills curve as they stretch down to County Wicklow – those same contours that the Vikings saw when they came ‘sniffing the Liffey’. The Irish Sea and the moody Dublin light flirt with each other as elusively now as they did in the ninth century. When the poet Eavan Boland came home to her native city at the beginning of the 1950s, she noticed the ‘muddy curve of the Liffey’.

Until recently, visitors to Dublin were struck by the number of construction cranes that blotted the horizon. From Dun Laoghaire on

the southside to Howth on the northside, the city clanked and hooted to the sound of building work. We bragged about what we owned and how rich we were. It turned out that we did own one thing: debt, and a lot of it.

On Behan's return in 1942, Liberty Hall (the first skyscraper for Dublin) had not been built. The city fathers drew a line under its completion in 1965 and thereafter looked on high-rise construction with disfavour. The creators of the new city in Docklands have delivered two excellent new theatres and the long overdue National Convention Centre. The development has earned for Dublin the title of 'Celtic Metropolis'. To journalist Con Houlihan, though, the city is still no more than 'villages tied together'.

Indeed, the centre is quite small; even smaller in James Joyce's time. Leopold Bloom could stop along the street and converse with fair-weather friends and not be drowned out by the noise of passing traffic. In 1904, one could hear the sound of the horse clopping past and the rattle of the tram to Rathmines or Phibsboro. It is still a walking city. Unlike other capital cities, low-density building allows the visitor to study the sky and scudding clouds, and that sudden change of light and mood that Joyce observed when he walked Dublin's streets at the turn of the twentieth century.

Visitors soon come face to face with its Georgian facades and 'days of softness'. They can delight in the muted colours of the city when the sun is hiding behind the clouds, and enjoy its harmonious architecture, and luxurious and extravagant squares, where the brass plates of doctors and lawyers gleam in the morning sunlight.

However, spare a thought for the eighteenth-century visitor to a city with over 2,000 beggars clamouring at the tourist for anything to keep them alive. Well-heeled citizens and ministers (such as Jonathan Swift) would fill their pockets with coins of all values to distribute to worthy causes along their path.

When Joyce sauntered around Dublin, the Victorian city was a place of ragged street urchins selling newspapers, pale-faced clerks emerging from gas-lit offices, cabbies huddled over the reins of horse-drawn cabs, trams grinding through badly lit streets, and trolleys swishing past. It was a city of lanterns and fog.

The poet Louis MacNeice saw another side. In his poem *Dublin* he noted how freely the porter ran from the taps. Admiral Nelson was no longer on his column watching the city collapse – far from it now. O’Connell Street has undergone a multi-million euro facelift. Ireland’s most historic boulevard is being transformed – taking it from ‘neon classical’ back to its neo-classical origins. The city fathers

will not get rid of the bullet holes in the columns of the GPO (many tourists still inspect them to be sure). The ‘Liberator’s’ street is to become a European-style avenue. However, they cannot do much about the wind whipping down the street in all seasons, making it one of the coldest boulevards in the world. No wonder the statue of Parnell at the north end wears two overcoats.

Dublin held the mind of writers like MacNeice. He was suspicious of her seedy elegance, ‘the glamour of her squalor and the bravado of her talk’. The chatter is still there in many of the pubs. He observed how Dublin is neither Irish nor English. Historically, the city gave its allegiance to the English Crown from the first Norman conquest in the twelfth century. Dublin was

often referred to as ‘Young London’ or ‘the royal city of Ireland’.

By the time of Joyce’s hundredth anniversary (1982), important elements of his city were gone. There were no trams. Dublin was without the *Evening Telegraph* and the *Freeman’s Journal*. Gaslight was seen only in the Phoenix Park. The slums of the city had vanished



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but rich and poor were ghettoised in a way that would have surprised Victorian aristocrats and panhandlers. The city is now divided in a different way – through wealth, education and possessions.

Then there are the pubs. Dublin's reputation as a literary city derives partly from the period just after the Second World War. The town was deluged with visitors, all looking for the essentials that they could not get in war-starved Europe – steak, butter and cream. One could be fitted with a tweed suit in a week. Men drank inexpensively. In the misty nostalgia there seemed to be more time – the shout of the sixties had yet to be heard. Even the pints were pulled more slowly and the rhythm of pub life was carefully modulated by the personality of the owner – 'himself' behind the bar.

The poet Patrick Kavanagh was deep into his thirties when he came to the city. In his poem, *If ever you go to Dublin Town*, he is cautious about how he was viewed by the locals. He was all too aware of the opinion-forming power of the pub – all those 'tongues dipped in vinegar'. Kavanagh advised others to go into some of his favourite watering holes along Baggot Street and counsel the locals about what he was like to know. 'Eccentric' would be the reply. So too is the city. Kavanagh may have taken a leaf out of Swift's book when he asked the reader to

*Suppose me dead and then suppose
A club assembled at the Rose
Where from discourse of this and that
I grow the subject of their chat*

An early twentieth-century visitor to the city remarked that 'one of the most delightful aspects ... is its frugality and lack of ostentation.' In the Dublin of the 'noughties', a city bucking with success, there seemed to be no time for the old pub talk. Does everyone sitting around the pub or café table want to be a poet now? Eavan Boland thought so when she went to pubs in the 1960s, but perhaps this is no longer true. Nonetheless, follow the trail around Dublin's pubs and see if you can spot traces of poets and their work.

DAVY BYRNE'S

21 DUKE STREET, DUBLIN 2

PERHAPS 'WORLD famous' is a bloated description for this 'moral pub' (as it was referred to in *Ulysses*) but it does have a wealth of historical connections and literary lore. There was a real Davy Byrne. He hailed from County Wicklow and bought the pub for just over £2,000 in 1889. The Bailey pub across the street was owned by a Mr Joyce and the writer, perhaps to avoid confusion, chose not to favour it in his novel *Ulysses*. Instead, he preferred Davy Byrne's as the setting for the *Lestrygonians* episode of the novel. The literary connection has paid off handsomely.

Leopold Bloom, the everyman Jew in *Ulysses*, walked into the pub after recoiling from the Burton restaurant (and billiard room) at 18 Duke Street, where he had seen the lunchtime eaters 'slopping in their stews and pints'. Bloom orders the Gorgonzola cheese sandwich and a glass of burgundy. Nosey Flynn badgers the owner for a tip for the Ascot Gold Cup. Bloom observes the uncontrollable movements of Flynn's nose to great comic effect. He also notices the nice quiet atmosphere of the pub, the quality of the wooden counter and how it 'curves just there'. In Bloom's day, the shelves behind the bar were filled with sardine tins and Plumtree's Potted Meat.

Joyce's best-known novel was published by Sylvia Beach, a Paris bookshop owner. When she met Joyce at a literary gathering she remembered how 'he put his limp boneless hand into my tough little paw'. She had met her literary god. The publication of *Ulysses* in 1922 led to a pilgrimage to this pub. It began as a trickle but turned into a flood after the first Bloomsday celebration in 1954. The idea came about after pub conversations between John Ryan, Tony Cronin and Brian O'Nolan. A group of literary enthusiasts and Joyceans would follow in the footsteps of the characters from Joyce's novel, re-enacting some of the episodes and reading from the book. Bloomsday has become an annual event for Joyce aficionados and *poseurs* alike. Davy Byrne's transforms itself into an Edwardian fashion show,

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where Dubliners and literary tourists don boaters and declaim from the novel. It is lots of fun, although one world-famous poet gets out of the city on 16 June to avoid the pretentious commotion.

Davy Byrne's has been blessed by its proximity to The Dáil, the Mansion House and the Catholic University on St Stephen's Green. Joyce and fair-weather student friends like Oliver St John Gogarty frequented the pub. James Stephen, whom Joyce chose to finish *Finnegan's Wake*, also favoured 'DBs'. Others were here too. Beckett was remembered as a remote figure in the pub in the 1930s. He hated the 'indiscretion and broken glass' of the Dublin pub scene. A galaxy of mid-century writers also inhabited 'Davy's': Patrick Kavanagh, Myles na gCopaleen and Brendan Behan.

The founding fathers of the Irish Free State met upstairs. Members of the outlawed cabinet of the Provisional Government including Michael Collins (the 'soldier, not statesman') and Arthur Griffith (first President of the new state) both imbibed in the pub during the turbulent years of 1919 to 1922, when the Irish Free State came into being. There is a well-worn story of the barman calling time in the pub only to be told by a regular, 'Time be damned! Aren't half the cabinet sitting upstairs'. A free bottle of wine was offered to Griffith when the Treaty was signed to bring in self-government after 800 years.



Street plaque of *Ulysses*



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THE LIVES OF THE WRITERS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*For the newcomer or tourist Ireland is simply charming,
but it is also an old island, full of demons and old hate*

Iris Murdoch

YOU CAN take the writer out of Dublin but you cannot take Dublin out of the writer. The Irish xi is sure to feature strongly in any anthology of the great white male writers of the twentieth century. Many of them did have a love of sport – Beckett for cricket and horseracing,

THE LIVES OF THE WRITERS

and Behan for soccer, but not Shaw for golf. Many Irish writers rejected the four 'F' words of Irish life – faith, fatherland, family and friendship – and left the country. Joyce took the lead and moved to mainland Europe 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.'

A string of literary talent had emerged in Ireland from 1890 onward. Writers gravitated towards the ascendancy houses of Ireland – those 'ships out at sea' – and their more humble abodes in Georgian Dublin. Like many artistic movements, this one began with a group of expatriates. In April 1892, W.B. Yeats gathered his friends in Chiswick in London to establish the Irish Literary Society. Within a year, Douglas Hyde, first President of Ireland, founded the influential Gaelic League. This organisation pledged to preserve and revive Irish as the vernacular language.

It all happened in Dublin. George Moore called the city 'the capital of the Celtic Renaissance'. The Irish Literary Theatre was opened in 1899 and the Abbey came into existence five years later. What emerged was a movement to revive the native language, arts and crafts. In the tearooms of Dublin, the talk was of Irish renewal based on the rich lore and traditions of the past.

However, the Literary Revival began to break down when the leaders argued and fell out. In 1928, the Abbey Theatre rejected Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, and so he left Ireland, vowing not to return. He had done for the Dublin working class what Synge had done for the rural Irish peasant: he gave them a voice. He did not, however, expect it to be silenced by the National Theatre.

For many writers, Dublin was a provincial backwater – priest-ridden, parochial and paralysed. Joyce called it 'the seventh city of Christendom' and it was not a place that encouraged free artistic expression – quite the contrary. In 1926, the Irish government set up a committee to investigate the 'evil literature' found in English magazines and newspapers. When the Censorship of Publications Act was passed in 1929, its reach was felt into the area of published books that were deemed 'indecent or obscene'.

JAMES JOYCE (1882–1941)

When I die Dublin will be written in my heart

JAMES JOYCE was born in Dublin in 1882, to an affluent family from Cork City. His father, John Joyce, was feckless: drinking by profession and impoverishing the family before the writer went to live in Zurich and Trieste in 1904. He was twenty two years old and already convinced of his impending greatness. He was not going to bend the knee: ‘I will not serve that which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church.’

Joyce feared that the forces of catholicism and nationalism would throw nets over his soul and stifle his creativity, so he got out. He rarely returned, although he did toy with some entrepreneurial ideas of running a cinema and exporting Irish tweed and linen to Italy. His first work of prose was *Dubliners* (1914). *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was published in America in 1916. It was quickly recognised as a masterpiece; as the story of an Irish Catholic upbringing, it has not been equalled.

Joyce was educated by the Jesuits at Clongowes Wood College in County Kildare and at Belvedere College in Dublin. Father Conmee was the rector and he offered to have the gifted youngster educated at Belvedere for free. Joyce’s father jumped at the suggestion. At least his son would not suffer the indignity of an education at a Christian Brothers school. Joyce was grateful for his Jesuit education; it taught him how to ‘order and how to judge’.

During the First World War, he worked on *Ulysses* (which was published in 1922). In this book, he immortalises not only himself but also the city of his youth. The novel deals with eighteen hours in the life of his home town, using many literary styles, allusions, and the vernacular language of *Dubliners* to create an intricate mosaic of life in one place. His feel for the external sound and tangled appearance of the city was faultless, but what made the book revolutionary was his understanding of the inner consciousness of his characters.

It took Joyce seven years to write *Ulysses* (it took this writer seven years to read it). Joyce joked that he wanted to keep the academics busy for a century. How right he was! Joyce has become an industry for academic interpretation. Controversy has followed his name in publishing circles throughout the world. Bernard Shaw gave his reaction to *Ulysses*: 'A revolting record of a disgusting phase of civilization; but it is a truthful one.'

Many enthusiasts believe that *Ulysses* should be read aloud and in a Dublin accent. Brendan Behan thought it was a 'good gag book'. W.B. Yeats could not understand it, but Joyce had predicted as much when he met the poet on his way to Paris. On hearing that Yeats had turned forty, Joyce remarked: 'You are too old for me to teach'.

The world may have been ill prepared for *Ulysses*, but it had to wait more than sixteen years for Joyce's great puzzle, *Finnegans Wake* (1939). The book is set in the dreaming subconscious of a Chapelizod publican named Tim Finnegan. In this 'book of the night' Joyce pushed language to its limits. He literally wrote a new language – some called it gibberish. Nonetheless, the book gave him tremendous pleasure to write. His wife, Nora, recalls being woken one morning by the sound of her husband laughing out loud at something he had just written. 'Jim, either stop writing or stop laughing', she shouted. The book is packed with historical anecdotes, popular ballads, old Dublin jokes and scandals, and almost anything else that took Joyce's fancy at the time.

James Joyce died in Zurich in 1941. The atmosphere of the Swiss city reminded him of his hometown. Coincidentally, his first landlady in Zurich was a Frau Dubliner. Joyce was amused. He never lost interest in his native city, and there was a constant stream of visitors from Ireland. He softened his attitude to his fellow countrymen in later years when he declared: 'The Irish are the most intelligent, most spiritual and most civilized people in Europe.' This is quite a turnaround from another statement: 'Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.'



THE PUB, the poet and the pint. In Dublin, they seem to be inseparable. There is a striking range of hostelries to choose from. With this guide, you can discover the gin palace, the long hall and the spirit grocer, and read about the characters who frequented them. There are short pieces about snugs and shebeens, the notorious *Monto*, and biographies of the city's most famous literary figures. Included in the heady mix is the story of how pubs came into being and how the culture developed over the centuries.

Kenneth Tynan once said: 'English drama is a procession of glittering Irishmen'. The public house is where many of them sharpened their wit. Joyce, Beckett, Behan and Flann O'Brien each had a regular haunt. This book will show you which pubs they favoured. You can sally forth in their footsteps and raise a glass to their memory – and savour a great tradition.

'Colourful and entertaining, [the book] gives the reader plenty of excuses for passing an afternoon in quiet literary libation contemplation' IRISH TIMES

Connoisseurs of Irish pubs will want to buy the excellent Dublin Literary Pub Crawl guidebook by Colm Quilligan. RICK STEVE'S IRELAND GUIDE 2013

WHAT THE PRESS SAID ABOUT THE DUBLIN LITERARY PUB CRAWL TOUR

"Excellent and highly recommended ... It's also great fun and gives a fine introduction to Dublin pubs and Irish literary history." THE LONELY PLANET GUIDE

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