

Bloomsday Brunch 2019

On Thursday, June 13th, we were welcomed by the Irish Group for a second celebration of Bloomsday. Femmes d'Europe Bloomsday 2019 was again sold out and just as enjoyable as last years.

As mentioned in the announcement for the event, **Bloomsday** is a commemoration and celebration of the work of the famous Irish writer James Joyce. It refers to June 16th, 1904, the single day on which the entire -world renowned- novel *Ulysses* is set. The day is named after the main character in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom. June 16th, 1904, is the actual date of James Joyce's first outing with the woman who became his wife, Nora Barnacle, who was also the inspiration for the other main character in *Ulysses*, Leopold's wife Molly Bloom. The action is set in Dublin, the author's birthplace, a place he both loved and hated as he himself said, and which is the universal city in all his work, despite his living on the continent for most of his life. Nowadays Bloomsday is celebrated, not only in Dublin but worldwide; as Ambassador Helena Nolan put it in her introductory speech: 'it is Irish literature's St. Patrick's Day!'

About 75 guests gathered at the Irish Embassy, made available by the generous hospitality of Ambassador Helena Nolan, the Irish ambassador to Belgium and member of Femmes d'Europe. We were first invited to a wonderful buffet -prepared by the Irish group and consisting of Irish Guinness-stew, new potatoes, Irish sausages, bacon, tomatoes and black pudding, with home baked brown soda bread and butter. Once seated with our plates of delicious brunch we began with a lively and informative introduction by Helena. For instance, *Finnegan's Wake*, (a notoriously difficult novel to read not least because James Joyce coined new English words to better reflect our thinking processes), was said to have been written after Joyce had completed a 64 lesson Flemish course, while on holiday in Belgium!

Then we were treated to a program of music by Dr Páidí Ó Dubháin who chose 4 poems with the theme "love and loss" from James Joyce's *Chamber Music*. Páidí made his own settings of the poems, pre-recording his own piano accompaniment for the event. Thus we witnessed the premier of Páidí's musical performance of these four beautiful poems! Each dealt with different phases of love, starting with the uplifting outlook of a young man in love and slowly changing into maturity and melancholy as the poems progressed. I was especially taken by a line in the last verse: "I hear an army charging up on the land..." Thinking "war" I was rather surprised to learn this was about the sea!! Its last phrase "my love, my love, why have you left me alone?" illustrates Joyce's cynical view of the comfortlessness of the end of one's road on love's journey.

During coffee and porter cake (again home made by the Irish group and delicious), we were entertained by the actors Isabel Walsh, Owen Thompson and William Mulhearn of the Irish Theatre Group. They read and enacted an abridged version of chapter 4 from *Ulysses*. It is the scene where Leopold prepares breakfast for Molly who is still sleeping, and then brings it up to her with the post. Whilst in the bedroom the kidney he has put on the stove in "sizzling butter", burns!

I have to admit, that to my Dutch palate having kidneys for breakfast, particularly "grilled mutton kidney's which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine", is inconceivable, but then to the Irish our Dutch bread and hagelslag (chocolate sprinkles) is probably pretty dubious as well! The actors made chapter 4 very lively and entertaining, including the stalking cat. After the scene from Ulysses each actor read a poem by James Joyce.

Páidí had earlier sung a song about Tim Finnegan, who after too much whiskey drops off a ladder, breaks his skull and is laid on his deathbed for his final wake. Some rowdy comments and action around the wake are described "woman to woman and man to man" "row and ruction soon began"; when in a final brawl whiskey falls on Tim Finnegan's head and he revives roaring: "Thundering Jaysus, do ye think I'm dead."

We were certainly all very alive after the very enjoyable event; thank you to the Irish group and thank you to the Irish Ambassador. I am looking forward to next year's Bloomsday. Páidí closed proceedings with a beautiful rendition of 'Nora'.

(On James Joyce, I recommend the following YouTube clip which I found very informative: <https://youtu.be/1SuHkY2wAQA>)

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