

# Bloomsday Brunch at the Embassy of Ireland

Thursday 13 June 2024

So, what is Bloomsday? If you are Irish the reply is self-evident. If you are not Irish and you do not know, you learned all about it at the Bloomsday Brunch in the Irish Embassy! If you did not attend that brunch, let me explain:

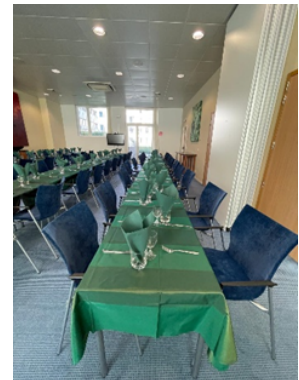
You have probably heard of James Joyce. He is the most famous Irish writer there is, world famous - even though he never won the Nobel Prize - and in Ireland he is now revered. You may also know that he has written a number of very well-known books, including *Ulysses* and *The Dubliners*. But have you read his books? I have not met anyone who has read *Ulysses* in its entirety. I am advised to read *The Dubliners* which is supposed to be a much easier read.

In *Ulysses* Joyce chronicles one day, 16 June 1904, in the life of Leopold Bloom and his 'Odyssey' through Dublin. 16 June is now celebrated as Bloomsday (the apostrophe got lost over the years!).

Why, you may ask, did James Joyce choose 16 June 1904, as the day to feature in his novel. Well, it turns out that it is by no means a random date. It is a date of particular importance for James Joyce as that was the day on which he had his first date with the love of his life, Nora. Interestingly, they only got married in 1931 after having lived together for 27 years and having produced two children.

What hardly anyone knows, is that James Joyce loved music, and initially wanted to become a tenor. But as one of his friends was a better singer than him and he did not want to be second rate, he stuck to writing. His love

for music remained, however, and many of his poems were set to music under his supervision. We were regaled to some of these at the Bloomsday Brunch, but first, we ate!



The Irish ladies of the Femmes d'Europe not only enabled us to celebrate the Bloomsday with them, but they also treated us to a wonderful homemade lunch. A beautifully cooked and spiced ham was at the centre of the meal which was served with sausages, carrots, parsnips and, of course, potatoes.

The Irish ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium, H.E Kevin Conmy, had opened his Embassy for this event and he opened his wine cellar as well. Instead of Guinness beer, which I suppose Bloomsday celebrants would imbibe in Dublin, as a nod to Brussels customs, we got treated to excellent white and red wine. We sat at carefully set tables, with green table cloths and had a very enjoyable tasty meal.

After having satisfied our appetites, we were regaled to the cultural offerings the Irish Group had prepared. Music was provided by Páidí Ó Dubháin, whose Day Job is in the Chorus of the La Monnaie Opera House. He

sang two of James Joyce's poems, which had been set to music: *'Rain has Fallen'* and *'The Lark in the Clean Air'*. Páidí also performed two Irish folk songs. The English language *'Nora'* was evocative of Nora, the great love of James Joyce. Páidí, who is a fluent Gaelic speaker from Ulster, then sang *'Seán Ó Duibhir a' Ghleanna'* in Irish to conclude his appearance. During his performance a tear or two was surreptitiously wiped away.



The Irish Theatre Group asbl, a Brussels-based amateur theatre group, which is highly decorated with international prizes, also performed for us. One of their members, Nora Connolly, wrote a play about the relationship between James Joyce and Nora: *'Nora and Jim'* She provided a special text for

the occasion. It was performed by Noreen Doyle and William Mulhern and gave us a special feel for Joyce and his Nora. Noreen recited the short and amusing text *'Will You Have a Drink?'* from *'Stuff Irish People Love'* by Colin Murphy and Donal O'Dea.

Noreen finished with a beautiful and highly appropriate text on the life of the characters in a play, how they come into being through the writer, and as importantly, what happens to them when we, the audience, leave. It has been created by another Dubliner, Dermot Bolger, and is called *'Where will we go?'* which was written shortly after the 2008 financial crisis. Bolger wrote the stage adaptation of *Ulysses*.

After these wonderful experiences, we socialised over coffee and home-made fruit cake.



I am looking forward to next year's Bloomsday Lunch, and maybe I will have read *The Dubliners* by then!

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German Group