

# Connecting with Ulysses

By Eric Villiers

There can have been few first readers of James Joyce's *Ulysses* who haven't flinched as the encyclopaedic detail of the text unfolds. For most people it's a novel that demands a 'reader's companion'. One of the latest to be published, *Ulysses Unbound* by Terence Killeen, a leading Irish Joycean, is an excellent solution and exactly what it says on the blurb, "... comprehensive and comprehensible..."<sup>1</sup>

For Dubliners the read must be a little more pleasing because their city's architecture and characters, fictional and real, feature heavily in the wanderings, over a single day, of the two main protagonists Leopold Bloom (a fictionalised composite of several Dubliners) and Stephen Dedalus (based on the young Joyce).

Nevertheless so vast is the scope of *Ulysses* that for non-Dubliners there is still fun to be had detecting references and allusions to characters, institutions, buildings, enterprises and mythologies that point to people and places all over the island.

Armagh is no exception. Indeed this ancient community seems as well represented in *Ulysses* as any other outside Dublin. However for the purposes of this article allusions to folklore and legendary tales from the locality's earliest times, have been set-aside in preference for facts and evidence that connect the story with solid, modern Armagh, its environs and its people.

## Five characters

While Armagh's history and mythology is often acknowledged in the novel the high number of references to the primatial capital in more specific terms is interesting. Because of its ecclesiastical importance there are of course references to men like Cardinal Michael Logue and the Church of Ireland Pri-

mate, Rev Dr William Alexander but clerics aside, there are several other real-life characters with local connections who can be traced in Joyce's text.

Five were immortalised in Joyce's epic: George Russell, William Brayden, Frank Harris, Barton McGuckin and Dr Vincent O'Brien, while another prominent figure in Dublin, William J. Lawrence would have been known to Joyce as an authority on Shakespeare. Although not named in the novel Lawrence would almost certainly have contributed to any real life Shakespearean discussions in the National Library referred to by Joyce.

From a county perspective the most important of the 'Armagh' group is Russell, the poet, social reformer and painter,



AE - George Russell 1867-1935

activist he knew as a friend: one who may well have influenced Joyce's early writing.

In chapter eight Joyce captured the essence of Russell in a simple yet memorable phrase as the mystic and social reformer walking with "beard and bicycle" in Grafton Street.

However he also refers disparagingly to Russell, affronted that the Armagh man once compiled a book of young Dublin poets that omitted his work. For all that Joyce seems to have been indebted to him in more ways than one. Russell did help him get published and lent him money which Joyce acknowledged in *Ulysses* in the thoughts of Stephen, "A. E. I. O. U", as he discussed his Shakespeare theory with Russell and others in the library in Kildare Street.

It is probable that among the 'others' was William J. Lawrence, who was a Harvard lecturer and world authority on Shakespeare when Joyce was writing *Ulysses*. Lawrence had given up a lucrative commercial career and moved to Dublin in the 1890s in order to pursue his love of Shakespeare through research in the library.

Lawrence had started his working life as a drink salesman in Armagh around 1880 with Kirkers and Co. Educated at Methodist College Belfast he was the son of a railway inspector and made many friends in Armagh in the years before the Great Rail Disaster of 1889.

It was the worst rail crash in Ireland's history and in some ways was the 19th Century equivalent of 9/11. Not only was there the heavy loss of life and hundreds of injuries, the safety of the century's favourite mode of transport was being questioned. Like flying after 2001 after 1899 train travel would never be the same again.

The deaths of 88 people, mostly children, on a Sunday School excursion train affected the whole country and

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William James Brayden, 1865 - 1933

made headlines around the world. Lawrence was so intensely sad that he travelled to Armagh a day after the crash to lend his support to the community and in particular his friends the Cromic or Crummy family.

Incidentally Lawrence never came back to Armagh again until 1921, a year before *Ulysses* was published. Michael Collins, who was standing in the evenly divided Armagh City ward, asked the Protestant Lawrence to campaign on his behalf. Collins was duly elected to the first Northern Parliament.

## Editor and barrister

An earlier scene in the book (in *Aeolus*) is set in the newspaper offices of the *Freeman's Journal* and *Evening Telegraph*, at 4-8 Princes Street, and it's here that Bloom spots Brayden, or as the text presents him to readers:

WILLIAM BRAYDEN,  
ESQUIRE, OF OAKLANDS, SANDYMOUNT  
Brayden was the editor of the *Journal*

and Joyce singles him out as a “state-ly” giant among a host of babbling journo and literary hangers-on. Later in chapter fifteen “editor Brayden” re-appears as Joyce again doffs his hat to a man he clearly admired.

William James Brayden was born in Scotch Street, Armagh in 1865 and edited the *Freeman's Journal* from 1892 to 1916. His early education was at the Royal School Armagh and he graduated as a barrister from Trinity College Dublin, before starting his journalistic career as a reporter on the *Ulster Gazette*.

A short time later he returned to Dublin where he became Ireland's leading newspaperman and where he helped establish national institutions that developed much of the city's cultural life still appreciated today. He was a member of the Council of Trustees of the National Library of Ireland, vice president of the Royal Dublin Society and was associated with the early years of the *Feis Ceoil* and the Royal Academy of Music.<sup>2</sup>

If Brayden was the respectable face of his old school, Frank Harris his near contemporary at ‘Armagh Royal’, was its blackest sheep. By 1904 Harris was a well-known critic and litterateur and his name crops up in the novel during that debate about Shakespeare at the National Library. During the discourse Harris is praised for his “articles on Shakespeare in the *Saturday Review* [which] were surely brilliant”.

After Harris, an “indefatigable seducer”<sup>3</sup> and a friend of Oscar Wilde, had shocked the world with what was regarded as the most honest autobiography ever written,

his close friend George Bernard Shaw said of him: “[he] blazed through London like a comet, leaving a trail of deeply annoyed persons behind him, and like a meteor through America”.<sup>4</sup> *My Life and Loves* was originally published in 1922 but it could not be sold legally until the 1960s after Penguin won their famous legal battle over Lady Chatterley's Lover.

## Cathedral choir

While readers have long appreciated the musicality of Joyce's text, music per se is at the heart of the novel and at one point the “choirboy” talent of Barton McGuckin is lauded. McGuckin was a tenor, an organist, pianist and violinist who trained with Saint Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral choir in Armagh.

When he died at 60 years of age in Stoke Pogues, Armagh newspapers paid tribute to him. The *Ulster Gazette* of April 26, 1913 pointed out that he had “rubbed shoulders with Wagner, Verdi and Litz” and sang for Queen Victoria at a Royal Command performance, at Balmoral and at various other Royal events. According to the famed Dublin diarist Joseph Holloway one of McGuckin's finest moments was conducting an orchestra at the 1906 Exhibition in Herbert Park, Dublin.<sup>5</sup>

Joyce and his father John were both extremely proud of a story that, in 1875 after hearing John singing, McGuckin, the leading tenor with the Carl Rosa Opera Company, Dublin, told friends “[Joyce senior] had the best tenor in Ireland.”

James was of course a fine singer himself and in mentioning Vincent O'Brien he acknowledges his voice coach, who became Ireland's premier music professor. It's through O'Brien that another Armagh link crops up. By 1918 O'Brien had coached Count John McCormack and Dame Peggy Sheridan to world fame and it was in that year that he came across the Armagh-born mezzo-soprano, Mary Connolly, whose Dublin patrons asked O'Brien to train her for classical work after they'd discovered her singing for pennies in Aylesbury Road, Ballsbridge.<sup>6</sup>

Connolly, a former pit brow lassie in Lancashire, was born in Irish Street in 1892 and her discovery was such a romantic sensation that she quickly amassed a fortune on stage. To acknowledge her fame Armagh's citizens presented her with an engraved gold necklace and pendant.<sup>7</sup> Later O'Brien told the music critic of the Evening Herald (Dublin) that it was a tragedy she had come to him too late.<sup>8</sup> It was immediately after losing Connolly to music hall that O'Brien and a former pupil, the Irish-American baritone Walter MacNally, set up a national opera school in Dublin to get to raw talent before 'the halls' and cine-variety could damage potential operatic voices. MacNally was an extraordinarily handsome man who drew capacity crowds to the Tontine Rooms a.k.a. Armagh City Hall where he staged weeklong runs of what were known as 'tabloid' operas

## US President

Both men had impressive social connections and were supported by prominent members of the Irish diaspora in America. On singing engagements in America MacNally became friends with Joseph and Rose Kennedy, parents of the future US President John F. Kennedy. It's easy to imagine the toddler, JFK under the grand piano at house parties as Rose played and MacNally sang arias.<sup>9</sup> Music played a powerful role in people's lives around the turn of the 19th Century and Joyce reflected that by casting another major character in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom's wife Marion or Molly as a concert singer. It is Molly's fictitious family background that reveals another local link, albeit more tenuous than the others referred to here. In the Circe episode of the novel her father is referred to as Major (or Sergeant Major) Brian Cooper Tweedy of the Royal Irish Fusiliers. The regiment's home base has always been in Armagh where it still has its regimental museum. The fusiliers also make another appearance in the book with a reference to their famous battle cry and motto Faugh a Ballagh (Clear The Way).<sup>10</sup> There may also be another Armagh and military connection via the Boer

War, which also features in *Ulysses*. History suggests that Field Marshall Lord Roberts, known to his men as 'Bobs' was not a "great" general in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand in the Transvaal Armagh's Brigadier General Arthur Fitzroy Hart-Synnot C.B., C.M.G., astonished war correspondents like Winston Churchill and Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, because he was the only general that led from the front. Mounted on his horse ahead of his troops Hart-Synnot, who had an estate at Ballymoyer, Newtownhamilton, deliberately courted death, and won the nickname 'No-Bobs' for refusing to duck under fire. It's tempting to think that the nickname was a dig at armchair generals.<sup>12</sup>

## GPO architect

As for buildings and institutions with Armagh associations there are quite a few dotted through *Ulysses*. Joyce once said that if Dublin was flattened it could be rebuilt from his descriptions. Although he was probably joking, should the text be used for that purpose the name of Armagh architect Francis Johnston would surface as the designer of some of its finest architecture.

Here two examples may suffice. Bloom is walking in the Dorset Street area as, "The sun was nearing the steeple of St George's Church." The church, in Hardwicke Place was designed by Johnston in 1802. Then there's the world famous GPO building, which Johnston also built: "Under the porch of the general post office shoeblacks called and polished".

Finally there's a direct, if none too complimentary reference to an Armagh-founded institution when Stephen is talking to an Ulster-Scot and gets a dodgy run down on the ideals behind the formation of the Orange Order. The thought occurs to Stephen: "The lodge of Diamond in Armagh the splendid behung with corpses of papishes".

The people, places and institutions listed here may represent only a cursory examination of Armagh's place in *Ulysses*; there may be more to be found. Perhaps one day there will be a definitive

compilation of all the things that link Ireland's ecclesiastical capital to what many people regard as the greatest novel of the twentieth century.

## Endnotes:

1. Sleeve notes to *Ulysses* Unbounded A reader's companion to James Joyce's *Ulysses* by Terence Killeen, p. Wordwell Ltd., 2004
2. Obituaries in the Irish Independent 18 December 1933 and in The Irish Times 18 December 1933
3. The Encyclopaedia of Ireland, Gill and MacMillan, 2003
4. Sleeve Notes to My Life and Loves by Frank Harris first published and banned in 1922.
5. Holloway Diaries, November 20, 1921 (National Library of Ireland, Dublin)
6. Evening Herald, Dublin June 23, 1917
7. Ulster Gazette, July 28, 1917.
8. Evening Herald March 4, 1919
9. Irish Stars of Opera by Gus Smith, published by Madison Publishers Ltd, Dublin 1994
10. *Ulysses* Unbounded A reader's companion to James Joyce's *Ulysses* by Terence Killeen, p. Wordwell Ltd., 2004
11. The Boer War by Thomas Pakenham, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1979 see p457
12. ib. p228