RTÉ Brainstorm: Finding the Most Authentic Pub for Bloomsday

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James Joyce was fond of pubs, as was his father John Stanislaus, who drank the family inheritance away in them. His mother was no stranger to them either, having been born the daughter of a publican in the Eagle House Tavern in Terenure, formerly Roundtown, on the southern edge of Dublin.

In the novel Ulysses, Leopold Bloom posed his famous puzzle about crossing Dublin without passing a pub, as he wandered out of his house at 7 Eccles Street, to buy a kidney for his breakfast, on the morning of 16 June.

Joyce wrote extensively about Dublin, setting Ulysses in Dublin in 1904. He famously said to his friend Frank Budgen: "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book."

Save it, James. It can't. If you study Joyce's writing, you can get a general picture of what Dublin was like in 1904, its layout and its river, its social structures, nightlife – even its tram system. But you get a much more detailed picture of its people, what they thought, talked about and did as they went about the public and private moments of their day. You can find out where they were born, lived and were buried, where they socialised and where they were employed, even if most of them don't seem to be gainfully employed at all.

I write a James Joyce-related running blog and in it I try and compare the city of today with the city of 1904 to see what I can learn.

James Joyce's life began in the comfortable life of the southern suburbs in Dublin, and as the family descended into poverty, they headed progressively northwards, settling in
Cabra in 1902. In 1904, when he got a chance to move from the family home, Joyce immediately headed south, back across the river Liffey and onwards to continental Europe.

In May 2016 I worked out a run across Dublin without passing a pub, starting from where Joyce last lived on the northside, in the family home at 5 St Peter's Road in Cabra, and running to where he moved to on the southside at 60 Shelbourne Road in Ballsbridge. As I was doing the run, I wondered about doing the opposite: crossing Dublin by passing all of the pubs mentioned in Ulysses that are still pubs. The easiest solution to crossing Dublin without passing a pub is to go into all of them. I gave this a go by drinking in each of the pubs still in existence from Ulysses while developing the run past all of them. Somebody had to.

Joyce had a vast knowledge of Dublin, but we also know that he used a copy of Thom's Directory from 1904 when he was writing Ulysses. Thom's Directories classify Dublin and have done annually since 1844. Thom's lists the following classifications of licensed premises where you could purchase alcohol: Dining Rooms; Grocers, &c; Hotels and Proprietors Refreshment Rooms; Spirit Dealers; Taverns and Inns; Vintners and Publicans and Wine and Spirit Merchants.

In Ulysses, Joyce mentions a variety of places that sold alcohol, including bars in hotels and unlicensed premises, such as shebeens, which, by their nature, would be impossible to trace. I decided that any place that served a pint of Guinness to a person who could freely walk in off the street should count as a pub.

Spirit Grocers allowed groceries to be sold alongside alcohol. You don't see many of these pubs today – certainly not in Dublin – but Morrissey's in Abbeyleix and my personal favourite, O'Shea's in Borris, County Carlow survive. They're great if you want a tractor part to go with your pint. Shops selling spirits and groceries provided ways in which women could get a drink while still adhering to the Victorian veneer of respectability.

Many readers are put off by the complexities of Ulysses, worrying about parts that they don't understand. There is always something you won’t understand in the novel – and by all means, take a lifetime to study it. But if not, don't worry, just read the book out loud, take what you can out of it and move on. It is said that Joyce didn't write to be
read. Rather, he wrote to be re-read, and you can always return. The passage here illustrates the simple and the complex parts of Ulysses.

Goodbye Ireland I'm going to Gort. So I just went round the back of the yard to pumpship and begob (hundred shillings to five) while I was letting off my (Throwaway twenty to) letting off my load gob says I to myself I knew he was uneasy in his (two pints off of Joe and one in Slattery's off) in his mind to get off the mark to (hundred shillings is five quid) and when they were in the (dark horse) pisser Burke was telling me card party and letting on the child was sick (gob, must have done about a gallon) flabbyarse of a wife speaking down the tube she's better or she's (ow!) all a plan so he could vamoose with the pool if he won or (Jesus, full up I was) trading without a licence (ow!) Ireland my nation says he (hoik! phthook!) never be up to those bloody (there's the last of it) Jerusalem (ah!) cuckoos.

It doesn't take much to figure out what is going on. It's helpful to know that Throwaway was an unfancied horse that won the Gold Cup on the 16 June 1904, but Gort, and Jerusalem cuckoos? Time to read some more books.

Ulysses is often very funny, and much of the fun takes place in pubs like Barney Kiernan's in Little Britain Street where there is a mix-up over Paddy Dignam's death.

—Is it Paddy? says Joe.
—Yes, says Alf. Why?
—Don't you know he's dead? says Joe.
—Paddy Dignam dead! says Alf.
—Ay, says Joe.
—Sure I'm after seeing him not five minutes ago, says Alf, as plain as a pikestaff. — Who's dead? says Bob Doran.
—You saw his ghost then, says Joe, God between us and harm.
—What? says Alf. Good Christ, only five.... What?... And Willy Murray with him, the two of them there near whatdoyoucallhim's .... What? Dignam dead?
—What about Dignam? says Bob Doran. Who's talking about....?
—Dead! says Alf. He's no more dead than you are.
In Ulysses, Joyce mentions over 70 places where you can buy alcohol of which about half are still in existence – almost equally split between the northside and the southside of Dublin. Joyce knew both the north and south sides of the city intimately, having lived on both, and the novel spans the city. The pubs range from the Brian Boru on the north of the city, on Prospect Avenue in Glasnevin, to Clarke's City Arms in the northwest on Prussia Street. On the southside from The Malt House, formerly Mr Crimmins in the southwest of the city, on James's Street, to The Oarsman, formerly Tunney's on Ringsend Road in the southeast.

In Ulysses, Bloom has numerous obsessions – one of which is pub economics. He thinks that the position of Doyle's, formerly Dunphy's, in Phibsborough on the North Circular Road close to Glasnevin cemetery is tiptop:

*Dunphy's corner. Mourning coaches drawn up, drowning their grief. A pause by the wayside. Tiptop position for a pub. Expect we'll pull up here on the way back to drink his health. Pass round the consolation. Elixir of life.*
He also ruminates on another nearby pub, Larry O'Rourke's, on Eccles Street, now the Eccles Townhouse: He approached Larry O'Rourke's. From the cellar grating floated up the flabby gush of porter. Through the open doorway the bar squirted out whiffs of ginger, tea dust, biscuitmush. Good house, however: just the end of the city traffic.

He is less happy with the location of another nearby pub, thinking that The Big Tree, formerly McAuley's is poorly located:

> For instance McAuley's down there: n.g. as position. Of course if they ran a tramline along the North Circular from the cattlemarket to the quays value would go up like a shot.

They never did run a tram line down the North Circular, another of Bloom's obsessions, but he may have been right about the location of McAuley's. The Big Tree only opens on days when there are concerts and matches in Croke Park and was the only pub closed on the various nights I passed on my research runs.

The most famous pub in Ulysses is probably Davy Byrne's on Duke Street. If you don't believe me, pop down on Bloomsday any 16 June. The pub has the same name and location as in the novel. Step inside though, and it has no relation to the novel, as the interior has been entirely remodelled, principally in the early 1940s.

> He entered Davy Byrne's. Moral pub. He doesn't chat. Stands a drink now and then. But in leapyear once in four. Cashed a cheque for me once.

—Have you a cheese sandwich? —Yes, sir.

Like a few olives too if they had them. Italian I prefer. Good glass of burgundy take away that. Lubricate. A nice salad, cool as a cucumber, Tom Kernan can dress. Puts gusto into it. Pure olive oil. Milly served me that cutlet with a sprig of parsley. Take one Spanish onion. God made food, the devil the cooks. Devilled crab.

—Wife well?

—Quite well, thanks... A cheese sandwich, then. Gorgonzola, have you?
Joyce set up Davy Byrne's for life, by having Bloom order his burgundy and gorgonzola sandwich, which you can still order. (I enjoyed one when I visited.) In the passage above, Joyce describes Davy Byrne's character and his moral pub. In Kevin C. Kearns' Dublin Pub Life & Lore, an Oral History, the real Davy Byrne is described. He perhaps wasn't as moral as his pub: "And you take Davy Byrne, a most extraordinary man. Davy held court in his own place. And the story goes that he was making his will and was asked, 'Did you make all that money filling pints?' 'No, not filling them.'"

While the interior of many of the pubs has changed, refurbished as time and tastes changed, many of the pubs in Ulysses are gone completely. Many in the south city centre were turned into offices. Several in the north inner city were destroyed in 1916. The Oval, shelled by the HMS Helga, was rebuilt in the same spot with the same name. Even the Luftwaffe took one: Dan Bergin's on the North Strand. Luckily Dan owned another, a little closer to town. The bar of the Ormond Hotel and Barney Kiernan's on Little Britain Street, both places with almost entire episodes in Ulysses set in them, are awaiting redevelopment.

Not far from Dan Bergin's on the North Strand is a stretch of pubs little changed since Joyce wrote Ulysses. Heading south on the western side of Amiens Street, Bloom and Stephen pass in succession: Dan Bergin's, Mullet's, The Signal House, The North Star
Hotel and finally The Dock Tavern. Or as we know them: Lloyd's, Mullet's, Cleary's, The North Star, and The Brew Dock, which is on the corner of Store Street. The North Star has recently been glammed up, but the others retain some of their original character. Cleary's is a pub you should definitely visit if you really want to know the pubs of Dublin, never mind the ones in Ulysses.

What is the most authentic Joyce pub? You can buy a plaque with Joyce's head and some guff about an authentic Dublin pub award on the internet for €395.00. But does the award have any validity, credibility or authenticity? Hardly. The plaque gets the quote from Ulysses wrong for starters.
In Ulysses Lenehan votes on a pub to frequent:

To which particular boosingshed ...? My casting vote is: Mooney's!
So, if like Lenehan in Ulysses you have to pick one boosingshed to go to, which one should you choose? Does it matter if a pub is just mentioned in passing in Ulysses? Does that make it meaningful? In one sense, yes, and there are plenty of good examples, but for me, the most authentic would have to be one in which meaningful dialogue took place. Barney Kiernan's, the bar in the Ormond Hotel, and Davy Byrne's would be the strongest candidates. However, the first two are closed awaiting redevelopment, and the interior of Davy Byrne's bears no relationship to the pub frequented by Nosey Flynn in both Ulysses and Dubliners.

The most authentic James Joyce pub is not to be found in Ulysses at all. Instead, you will find it in Dubliners in the story Counterparts. It is here that the character Farrington ogles an English actress and arm wrestles the acrobat Weathers, each without success. The pub has the same name, is in the same place, and is little changed over the last century. The parlour room where the main action takes place is still in existence at the back of the bar. It is the essential James Joyce Dublin pub. That it is reputed to sell the best Guinness in all of Dublin is a bonus.

So pass all of the pubs in Ulysses, and be a Dubliner. While the pub itself does not appear in Ulysses, its name features in the opening line. My casting vote is: Mulligans!

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