

What Happened to Joyce in Galway and Connemara?: An Attempt to Baedekerize James Joyce

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Joyce Country is the name traditionally used for designating the north-eastern part of Connemara, a region in the west of Ireland, bordering the Maumturk mountains to the south-west, the Partry mountains to the north and the narrow spit of land between lough Corrib and lough Conn to the east. Rarely is this peaceful and lovely region mentioned in travellers' guides, but if it is, sometimes you can find the absurd remark that the Joyce Country was "made famous by the renowned Irish writer, James Joyce."¹ Nothing could be less true.

In a way, James Joyce was not even an Irish writer at all—he always was and remained a Dublin writer. When Joyce left Dublin in 1904 to live on the continent for the rest of his life, he had scarcely ever seen anything of the rural Ireland "beyond the pale." His one and only connection with "real Ireland" was his beloved and future wife Nora Barnacle who accompanied him to the continent: Nora came from the west, from Galway. It seems that Joyce indeed had to leave his home country in order to take some interest in its western parts. In Trieste on the shores of the Adriatic sea he began to listen to Nora's songs and stories. Also in Trieste, he earned some irregular money by writing articles for the local *Piccolo della Sera* on the so-called "Irish question"—articles in which Joyce pretended to have the expertise that in reality he quite obviously lacked.

Only twice, in 1909 and again in 1912, did Joyce make an attempt to see the west of Ireland himself. In 1909, he stayed in Dublin for some time in order to establish the very first Irish cinema, being paid for by Triestine businessmen. At the end of August, Joyce and his son Giorgio undertook a trip to Nora's home in Galway. Before going, Joyce told Nora in a letter (dated 21 August) how concerned he was about not being able to afford the trip:

I wrote today to your mother but really I don't want to go. They will speak of you and the things unknown to me. I dread to be shown even a picture of you as a girl for I shall think "I did not know her then nor she me. When she sauntered to mass in the morning she gave her long glances sometimes to

some boy along the road. To others but not to me" . . . I am absurdly jealous of the past. (*Letters I* 237, *SL* 160)

If Joyce did not overcome his jealousy of the past, he at least overcame the financial difficulties by means of a quite typical Joycean artifice. He had a pack of visiting-cards printed for himself, identifying him as a staff member of the *Piccolo della Sera*, produced one of the cards at the Midland Railways' counter and scrounged a complimentary ticket to Galway by pretending to work on a series of articles about Ireland and promising to write at least one piece about Galway (which, of course, he never intended to do).

Having arrived in Galway, coward Joyce was not so sure if Nora's relatives would really like to see him, so he sent four year old Giorgio ahead of himself and waited across the street until it was clear that he was welcome. Joyce's trip to Galway proved a great success. The young writer was called "Shames Showe" and "The Man with the X-ray Eyes" by everybody and proudly walked along Galway Bay with Nora's sister Kathleen.² He was put up for the night by Nora's uncle Michael Healy in Dominick Street, from where on 26 August he wrote a letter card to Nora musing about the strangeness of life, telling her that he intended next day to see the house where Nora had lived with her grandmother and to have a look into Nora's old room on the pretext of wanting to buy the property. Perhaps, he told Nora, they might both return to Galway together the next year: "You will take me from place to place and the image of your girlhood will purify again my life."³

Galway, which at that time was a town of no more than 15,000 inhabitants, opened up a completely new world for Joyce, who plunged right into it and even forgot about his chronic health problems. Here at last he had found a key not only to the unknown west of Ireland but also to Nora's hidden past. Back in Dublin, he wrote to his "little Galway bride" Nora telling her of the tears in his eyes after having heard Nora's mother sing out "The Lass of Aughrim" to him.⁴

Annie Barnacle's home in Galway in which this happened can still be seen today, nearly unchanged, in 8 Bowling Green. Two enthusiastic Galway ladies have turned the house into a small museum, the Nora Barnacle House, open daily in the summer season. This is the ideal place to commemorate Nora Barnacle Joyce, great lifetime companion to a great writer.

Joyce's being so moved by hearing "The Lass of Aughrim" results from his having known part of the song from Nora already and having used it before in his story "The Dead." In the story, Gabriel Conroy refuses to make the journey west and instead turns his eyes towards Europe; Joyce himself, however, seems to have discovered through his trip to Galway that his despising rural Ireland was too harsh an attitude and there was something

he had to make up for. Apparently he planned to spend a belated honeymoon with Nora in County Galway.

Three years passed, however, before the next Joycean trip to Galway occurred—and this time the trip was made by Nora and daughter Lucia. Joyce stayed in Trieste, boasted his independence and newly gained bachelorhood for a few days—but then his loneliness made him collapse. Soon he had scrounged the fare for the trip, and the whole family was united for four full weeks in the west of Ireland. Proudly Nora told her sister-in-law Eileen in a letter (dated 14 August 1912) that “all the people here were talking about him for running after me” (*LettersII* 302).

Joyce and Nora went to the Galway races and enjoyed themselves, although the weather could have been better, as Nora noted:

[W]e would enjoy it more if we had not such bad weather every second day rainy when its not rainy we usually go to the beach in the morning. the air is splendid here and the food Jim Georgie and myself are sleeping in my Uncle’s Lucia sleeps with mother you’d be surprised at how homely she has got . . . the two children love the place they are all out all day they dont give themselves time to eat Jim is also very much improved and myself. . . . (*LettersII* 302)

On dry days, Joyce, although not quite sportsmanlike, even exercised himself by rowing on the river Corrib. When it rained, he took to writing, the first result being an article entitled “The City of the Tribes” which Joyce soon after submitted to the *Piccolo della Sera*, thus belatedly keeping his old promise to Midland Railways, after all.

It should be noted, however, that Joyce’s article is a rather superficial account of Galway’s great past. The first sentence reflects the prejudice that Joyce himself had overcome only recently:

The lazy Dubliner, who travels little and knows his country only by hearsay, believes that the inhabitants of Galway are descendants of Spanish stock, and that you can’t go four steps in the dark streets of the City of the Tribes without meeting the true Spanish type, with olive complexion and raven hair. (CW 229)

Perhaps the best part of the article is the impressionistic last paragraph: “The evening is quiet and grey. From the distance, beyond the waterfall, comes a murmur. It sounds like the hum of bees around a hive. It comes closer.” This murmur is produced by distant bagpipes, “playing a vague and strange music” (CW 233).

Joyce and Nora also undertook a day trip to the Aran Islands, and although a day is scarcely enough time to get a full impression of these isles, again Joyce scribbled down an article for his Triestine paper: “The Mirage of the Fisherman of Aran.” Not surprisingly, this article does not

show the depth and understanding that can be found in John Millington Synge's famous book *The Aran Islands*, written a few years earlier. Quite obviously Joyce tried to imitate Synge's characteristic tone, but of course Synge had spent several months on the islands before being able to write his book. Small wonder, then, that what is most impressive in Joyce's article is his description of the journey out:

The little ship carrying a small load of travellers . . . leaves the little port of Galway and enters open water, leaving behind on its right the village of Claddagh, a cluster of huts outside the wall of the city. A cluster of huts, and yet a kingdom. Up until a few years ago the village elected its own king, had its own mode of dress, passed its own laws, and lived to itself. The wedding rings of the inhabitants are still decorated with the king's crest: two joined hands supporting a crowned heart. (CW 229)

Apparently Joyce did not know that the Claddagh ring had been designed by a Galway goldsmith named William Joyce—had he known it, he would surely not have failed to mention this.

The huts of Claddagh village have been demolished in 1932 in favour of a new housing-estate, but this is not the only reason why it is so hard today to imagine the atmosphere which Joyce encountered in Galway. In 1912, Galway had been in decline for about a century already, whereas today Galway is Ireland's boomtown. If we want to find traces of what Joyce saw nearly eighty years ago, we have to turn to Galway's more unspectacular corners. One of these is Ragoon cemetery, about one and a half miles west of the city centre. If you enter the cemetery through the old gate and turn your attention to the third grave on the left-hand side, a huge vault-like structure, you will be able to decipher the name of Michael Maria Bodkin, died in the year 1900, aged twenty years. This Michael Bodkin was Nora Barnacle's early admirer, the real-life model for Michael Furey in "The Dead." In 1912, Joyce and Nora visited the grave. Nora had tears in her eyes, and Joyce later wrote about this in his melodramatic poem "She Weeps over Ragoon."

In "The Dead," written long before, the dead boy's grave is transferred to the cemetery of Oughterard, a small village about which *Murray's Handbook for Ireland* in 1906 said: "With the exception of the enormous Union Workhouse, it does not contain anything worth notice."⁵ For Joyce, of course, there was another exception, and so on Sunday, 4 August 1912, he pedalled thirty-five miles by bike to see the cemetery. Afterwards he told his brother Stanislaus that the cemetery looked exactly like he had described it in his story—and he added delightedly that he had discovered the grave of one J. Joyce. This, however, seems hardly a miracle in a region where Joyce is one of the most frequent surnames.

The day after he had been to Oughterard, Joyce made another trip into rural Connemara, this time to the tiny village of Clifden far in the west, in

order to visit the famous Marconi wireless station and interview Marconi himself for the *Piccolo della Sera*. Guglielmo Marconi had founded the station in 1907 and from here telegraphed the first transatlantic wireless messages to cap Breton, Canada. The station consisted of about twenty buildings and a narrow-gauge railway which transported everything that was needed from Clifden to the station's site in the bog of Derrigimlagh. Unfortunately only ruins remain today. The Marconi station was burnt down by IRA activists in 1922.

Joyce did not succeed in 1912 to interview Marconi—maybe he did not even find the station. So he could not write another article for his newspaper in Trieste. In Joyce's enigmatic last novel *Finnegans Wake*, however, we can spot a few references to the "mightif beam maircanny" (FW 408.16, combining "mighty beam" and "might have been, Marconi"): "as softly as the loftly marconimasts from Clifden sough open tireless secrets . . . to Nova Scotia's listing sisterwands. Tubetube!" (FW 407.20).

Clifden is about fifty miles away from Galway, so it seems clear that contrary to what can be found in biographical sketches sometimes, James Joyce did not cycle all the way through Connemara. He was lucky enough to be able to rely on the service of the Galway to Clifden railway line, opened in 1895 and closed down in 1935. Joyce must have made the trip via Maam Cross, Recess and the small station at Ballynahinch. Ballynahinch castle, which today houses a four-star hotel, in 1912 still was the homestead of the Martin family, one of the "fourteen tribes" of Galway.

It is a pity that Joyce did not report on his trip into rural Connemara, even if it seems clear that a report from Joyce would not have been as well-informed as the reports written by John Millington Synge seven years before. Synge travelled through Connemara and Mayo in 1905, accompanied by painter Jack B. Yeats. Maybe Joyce's attempts at travel-writing for the *Piccolo della Sera* were half-hearted attempts to emulate Synge's reports for a British newspaper. On the other hand Joyce would not have been able to see Connemara with other eyes than that of a stranger—his one and only key to the Ireland "beyond the pale" was Nora, his "little Galway bride": her roots he discovered in Galway.

But what about Joyce's own family roots? What about the Joyce Country? Joyce's father, after all, all his lifetime stuck to the notion that he was a descendant of the Joyces of Galway, one of the fourteen tribes. James Joyce, however, made no attempt to take up this history when the railway carried him through Maam Cross, only a stone's throw from the Joyce Country.

Let us nevertheless pay a visit to the green valley of Joyce river and contemplate the magic hidden in the name of Joyce—there is still a chance to bring the story full circle. Halfway between Maam and Leenane, there is a small road to the right-hand side leading past lough Nafoeoy, until we reach Maamtrasna. Just here, on the border of counties Galway and Mayo, a Welsh Norman settled at the end of the 13th century: Thomas de Joise,

progenitor of the Joyce tribe. And just here, in Maamtrasna, a bloody crime occurred in 1882, the year James Joyce was born.⁶

During a night in August 1882, a family called Joyce was murdered—only nine-year old Patsy survived, severely wounded. There were three informers, also called Joyce, and within a few days, ten men were arrested. Two of these acted as Queen’s evidences and were released; five men made a confession in order to save their lives. The remaining three kept protesting their innocence and were finally sentenced to death: Patrick Joyce, Patrick Casey and, above all, Myles Joyce, who subsequently became something of a martyr in local folklore, since the trial was pushed through rather scandalously.

James Joyce must have heard a popular version of this murder case rather early from Nora, for in 1907 already—i.e. before he himself travelled to the west of Ireland—he wrote an article about the case for the *Piccolo della Sera*, entitled “Ireland at the Bar.” In this article, Joyce uses Myles Joyce as the prototype of the Irish backwoodsman falling victim to the English occupants’ injustice. James Joyce, either being misinformed or deliberately distorting facts, clearly overshoots the mark in his attempt to stand up for his namesake Myles Joyce,⁷ but his overall message becomes clear at the end of the article: “There is less crime in Ireland than in any other country in Europe” (CW 200).

This, at least, is the overall impression that we get when we today travel Connemara in general and the Joyce Country in particular: this is sheer idyll, peaceful and quiet. We cannot resist the temptation to climb one of the mountains alongside the Joyce river valley, lay down in moss and heather, peep up into the sky and in quite an unscholarly manner imagine James Joyce finding himself a resting-place in Connemara like his old crony Oliver St. John Gogarty, who settled in nearby Renvyle House.

Unimaginable? Well, maybe. The Joycean holidays in Galway ended unpleasantly. There was news from Trieste saying that Joyce’s Irish teacher’s certificate was not accepted and that his landlady had evicted him. In Dublin his attempts to get his collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, published failed. Frustratedly, Joyce turned his back to his native Ireland, never to come back.

And even the goodwill he had shown in the case of poor Myles Joyce was gone, and James Joyce again tended to associate the west of Ireland with poteen (illicit whiskey), violence, dirt and peatsmoke. In *Finnegans Wake*, we can find details of the Maamtrasna murders in the episode dealing with a certain Festy King (John Garvin holds that Joyce might have read the name Festus King on a shop front in Clifden while looking for the Marconi station in 1912).⁸ The “wasnotto be crime conundrum” now is acted out as follows:

a child of Maam, Festy King, of a family long and honourably associated with

the tar and feather industries . . . gave an address in old plomansch Mayo of the Saxons in the heart of a foulfamed potheen district. . . . (FW 85.22-26)

Shortly before this, Joyce mentions "blackfaced connemaras" (FW 76.1), which is a breed of sheep popular in the west of Ireland. Well, James Joyce indeed never managed to get into the Joyce Country. He will never know what he has missed.⁹

Notes

1. *Ireland* (Bindlach: Gondrom, 1987) 54; my translation from German.
2. John Garvin, *James Joyce's Disunited Kingdom and the Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976) 108.
3. Garvin 164.
4. Garvin 165; *LettersII* 242.
5. *Murrays Handbook for Ireland* (1906), as quoted by Nathan Halper, "The Grave of Michael Bodkin," *James Joyce Quarterly* 12.3 (Spring 1975): 278.
6. For a detailed account of the case, see Jarlath Waldron, *Maamtrasna: The Murders and the Mystery* (Dublin: Edmund Burke, 1992).
7. Details of Joyce's misconception are listed by Christine O'Neill-Bernhard, "Symbol of the Irish Nation, or of a Foulfamed Potheen District: James Joyce on Myles Joyce," *James Joyce Quarterly* 32.3-4 (Spring-Summer 1995): 712-21.
8. Garvin 161.
9. This article is a revised and condensed version of a text originally written in German: "'In the Heart of a Foulfamed Potheen District': James Joyce in Galway und Connemara," *Ireland Journal* 9.4 (December 1998): 18-29, rpt. in my book *Irische Reise* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1999) 107-26.