
One word is due to our greatest master of prose

By Kevin Kiely

ON WHAT grounds is Joyce owed an apology? Is he not lauded as a literary genius? Are there not international celebrations, monuments, and institutions founded in his name? Has he not respect and honour enough? The answer is no – and after a hundred years of pretending otherwise, it's time to finally face the facts.

There are many reasons why Joyce is owed an apology: his isolation and exile, his abject poverty, his ultimate prostitution to the publishing and tourist sectors ironically backed by his vilification and lack of recognition in Irish media during his actual lifetime. The most extreme example of this last is the burning of a thousand copies of *Dubliners* at the behest of a publisher and printer in Jervis Street, Dublin. Despite later denials by Maunsel & Co., Joyce insisted on the reality that the book had been burnt and left Dublin that same day with Nora Barnacle and their two children, never to return.

The burning of 'Dubliners' signified for Joyce his rejection by Ireland, and the lack of coverage for this abhorrent auto-da-fé is only one of the many glaring biographical inaccuracies (and omissions in feelgood biographies) in accounts of Joyce's life.

Joyce left Ireland but he remained Irish. He was a Parnellite, an admirer of Griffith and his Sinn Féin. His manifesto was stated by Stephen Dedalus in 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man': "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning".

Dedalus will not serve but he does not foreswear – and of course, he is a young man, and not Joyce. It is complicated though: on the verge of the German entry to Paris in 1941, an official at the Irish legation repeatedly offered Joyce and his son Georgio Irish passports, which would have allowed them to leave occupied France when they wished. The offers were declined, and Joyce "clung doggedly to his British passport". – all of which led inevitably to Bruce Arnold in 'The Scandal of Ulysses', claiming that "Joyce was neither British nor Irish,

practically and emotionally".

Arnold, an Englishman in exile in Ireland, may not be well-attuned to the national question. To his credit, however, more generally Arnold challenges the so-called definitive Joyce biography by Richard Ellmann for its weaving of fiction (namely 'Ulysses') with facts. Ellmann's is "a biography that will tell us what can and what cannot be determined as actually having existed outside Joyce's works". Ellmann falls short, losing himself in exegesis to the detriment of his biography. An under-recognised disservice to the great man.

Of course, Joyce grew up with an alcoholic widower father who was on the way down, and who moved house eighteen times in Joyce's childhood, was in perpetual debt and ill-equipped to rear his ten children, five of whom died in infancy. Joyce, a socialist, took on the tradition with no relish and famously remained in debt his entire life, and particularly to his family.

Our greatest writer, the toast of our oleaginous tourist industry, was so marginalised that he wrote his masterpiece in dire poverty. Joyce refers to life in Trieste in his personal letters: "Clothes: I have none and can't buy any...I wear my son's boots (which are two sizes too large) and his castoff suit which is too narrow in the shoulder." Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot brought a parcel from Ezra Pound in London to Joyce. In Lewis's 'Blasting and Bombardiering' we are told of how Joyce opens the parcel to find secondhand boots.



Former Royal University of Ireland, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin (left of photo): UCD owes apology for failing Joyce in English in his final exams.

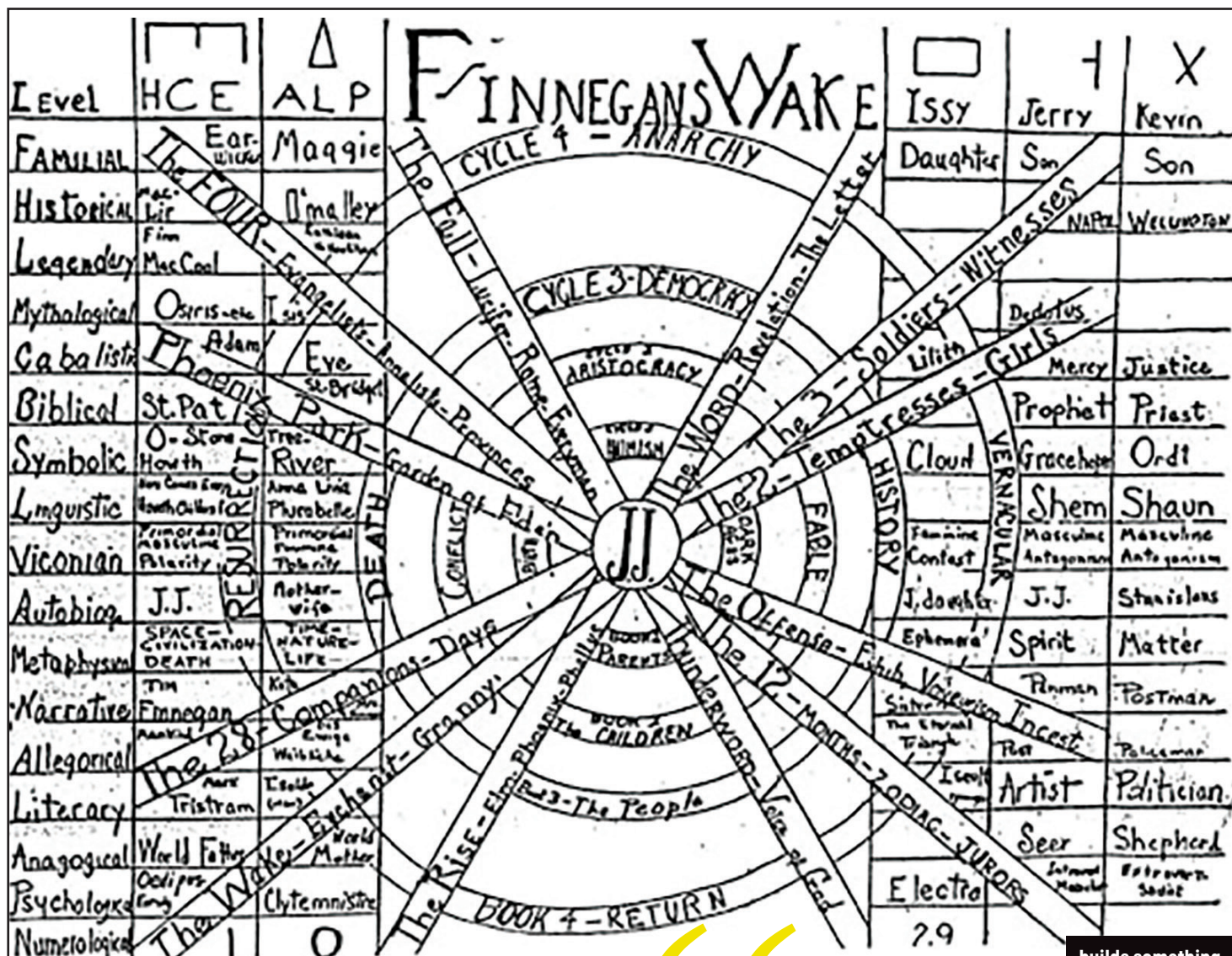
Joyce's real worry wasn't footwear, however, but sufficient patronage to live on. Pound begged John Quinn, the New York lawyer to give Joyce support after Edith Rockefeller McCormack had endowed his rent for a year in Zurich during the writing of 'Ulysses'. At Rue de l'Université in Paris, the twentieth address at which part of the book was written by this atavistic peripatetic, he completed the greatest novel of the twentieth century while sitting on the side of his bed "without a desk, without books". After years of poverty, stress and strain, Nora Barnacle left him and took her two children to her family in Galway – for a while.

Another dishonour done to Joyce, which his biographers are all too happy to gloss over, and which I believe I am publishing for the first time, is the fact that the predecessor to University College Dublin, humiliatingly failed him in his final examinations in...English.

As a graduating student "he had done well enough to pass," according to Ellmann. However, his marks in English were 344 out of 800, where the passing mark was 400. This would be like Einstein failing physics (which, despite persistent urban legends, he never did).

Joyce obtained his degree only by a narrow complimentary pass, due to his score of 465 in French and 417 in Italian. UCD's examination-correcting system must have grossly misinterpreted his final year paper in English for the BA.

Joyce was clearly academically capable, as demonstrated by the lectures he gave to the



Literary and Historical Society, titled 'Drama and Life' in January 1900, and 'The Poetry of James Clarence Mangan', in February 1902.

His Mangan paper was highly praised by the *Freeman's Journal* the following day: "It was deservedly applauded at the conclusion for what was generally agreed to have been the best paper ever read to the Society".

Joyce was on top of his studies to the extent that he was in correspondence with Henrik Ibsen of whose work he wrote erudite reviews.

It is embarrassing, for UCD, the onetime situs of a café called 'Finnegans Break', that someone whose genius would become indisputable through his literary legacy could be given such a low mark. UCD owe Joyce not only an apology, but a posthumous doctorate – to at last grant him the recognition he deserves. To say he would not have appreciated the accolade is belied by his energetic intellectual engagement during his time in UCD, as well as his sultry exiled and cunning silence about his final marks.

And even when the work was completed, it was mostly tossed aside. Mainstream publishers had rejected 'Ulysses' unanimously, and no Irish publisher in the 1920s would have accepted the scandalous book. The first printing was a subscribers' edition of 1,000 copies by Joyce's patron Sylvia Beach the bookshop proprietor of Shakespeare and Company in Paris.

When the work did finally get around, the reviews were highly negative – especially in London from Edmund Gosse, Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf. Joyce had demolished the traditional English novel and satirised



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its form and content – but "what else would you expect from an Irish writer?" was their general snuffy summation.

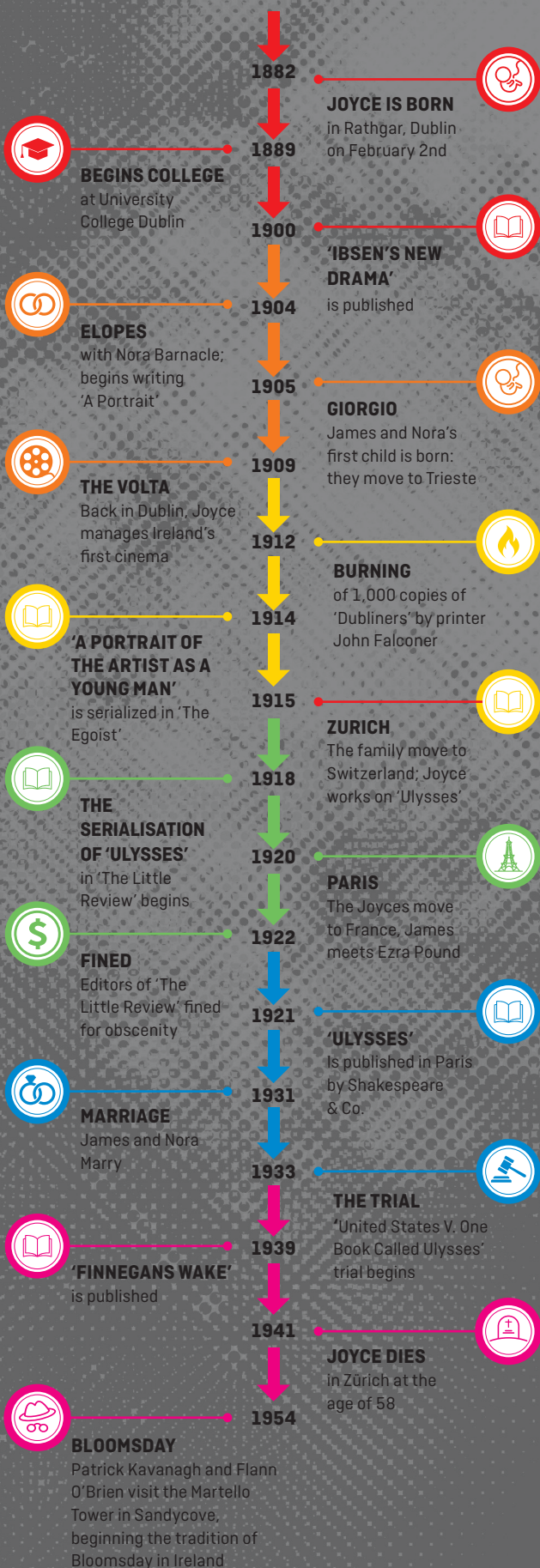
Joyce's brother Stanislaus on reading 'Ulysses' remarked: "I wish you would write verse again...after this last inspection of the stinkpots. Everything dirty seems to have the same irresistible attraction for you that cow dung has for flies".

Joseph Collins in the *New York Times* called 'Ulysses' an artistic failure because of its "unreadability".

'Ulysses' in its first year of underground publication was depicted as immoral, obscene, depraved, and disgusting, and was banned in England and the US.

builds something

JOYCE TIMELINE



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Of course, there were some exceptions. Pound exploded in the *Mercure de France*: "Unite to give praise to 'Ulysses', those who do not, may content themselves with a place in the lower intellectual orders".

Joyce's exile required patrons; mainstream publishing failed him, hence the underground publishing of his books at first through excerpts in literary magazines, as with both 'Ulysses' and 'Finnegans Wake'. 'Finnegans Wake' took more years than 'Ulysses' to write, and with it Joyce reached his apogee, abandoning fiction for linguistics where characters, dialogue and events are subordinate.

'Ulysses' permutes words obsessively within its sentences, whereas 'Finnegans Wake' permutes consonants and vowels within the words themselves.

Joyce subverts the traditional sentence, delving into the subatomic particles to create a new language.

And yet, Irish Booker Prize fiction winners and runner-ups, such as Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, John Banville, or Roddy Doyle have never engaged with Joyce's innovations, techniques, and originality within either 'Ulysses' or 'Finnegans Wake', and our most internationally known fiction writer, Maeve Binchy, always extolled William Somerset Maugham as her master. On Joyce, Sally Rooney, a fellow socialist, remains silent though to be fair, she offers an apparent homage to Joyce's short story 'The Dead' in the form of the unpleasant Felix singing 'The Lass of Aughrim'.

Joyce's legion of critics might well have joined in the apology during the mammoth smugfest seminar taking place in Dublin this June. Their books about 'Ulysses' over the years have generally been more concerned with critical analysis than biographical veracity. Joyce is mulled and mused over as a literary mystery, with little consideration for his life.

The creation of 'Ulysses' presents a totally achieved work of art amongst its other myriad beneficent results: enlargement of Dublin's provenance globally, the generation of cultural wealth, the Joyce Industry, Joyce in University Curricula with prose fiction, innovative techniques, and not least the largesse of comedy conferred on the reader.

When Bruce Arnold, Sylvia Beach, Maria Jolas, Flann O'Brien, and Patrick Kavanagh (among others) launched the Joyce Tower, Sandycove in 1962 Bloomsday in Ireland came into existence. It imported an industry. And yet the wrongs done to Joyce throughout his life have hardly been recognised, let alone atoned for.

Presidential pardons are granted. Government apologies are part of the historic continuum. The posthumous apology, from our President, Politicians, Burghers and the well upholstered literary industry and academic oligarchs, to the supreme modernist is overdue. Joyce's reaction, we can be sure would be superhumanly wry. **L**

Kevin Kiely is author of 'Arts Council Immortals' and other books, available on Amazon.