

## The New York James Joyce Society

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As a married graduate teaching assistant with a child and working on a masters degree in English, my principal income in 1958 was only about twenty percent of what it had been in my former calling, the used car business. What psychic income there was in the automobile business died with my father the year after I got my B.A., and when I returned to graduate school, I needed even more urgently to continue working part time as a singer and producer of radio commercials until I could land a full-time teaching job. At Temple University I took Joyce with Mabel Worthington, who at the time was working on an index for her co-authored book with Matthew Hodgart, *Song in the Works of James Joyce*. Since I had access to a studio in the Temple University radio station on Tuesday nights (making singing commercials for the Clements agency), and to professional Philadelphia actors who could do Irish accents, I offered to make a demonstration tape of a chapter of *Ulysses* with the actual music referred to in the text as background for Bloom's thoughts. Mabel agreed to accept it in lieu of a term paper and I was on the way to a career glossing Joyce's musical references.

When I completed the M.A. at Temple I got a job at the State University of New York, College of Fredonia, and a scholarship to complete my Ph.D. at Buffalo, a major Joyce manuscript repository, where I was privileged to work with Tom Connolly. Fredonia's specialty in the New York State system was music, and many of its undergraduates were card-carrying members of either the musicians union or the American Guild of Variety Artists. The campus radio station was right next door to my office, and after I smoozed around for a month or so with the student staff and faculty director, I thought

I might possibly have the means to expand the earlier tape of the segment from the “Lestrygonians” episode into a full-blown album of the entire chapter. I applied for a SUNY Research Grant my first semester at Fredonia, and was awarded enough for supplies and professional technicians to help with the project.

After five months of working weekends, the album was finished, and I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I didn’t know who might be interested besides my wife and the cast, but Mabel, who lived in New York while she went to Columbia, told me about a group of people who loved Joyce so much they met four times a year at the Gotham Book Mart to talk about him and pay homage. I took a chance and called Frances Steloff, the owner of the Gotham, to ask if at any time in years to come they might give me the opportunity to play segments of my tape and talk about Joyce and music. To my astonishment she said yes, and asked if I would like to come down for the Bloomsday meeting, then only a couple of weeks away. Short of the day I caught my first sailfish, and possibly the day my eldest son was born, nothing ever made me happier. I was to be sandwiched in between two other speakers, she said, but they wouldn’t mind because they were regulars.

That was the beginning of a long association with what I think was the first on-going organization in the United States and possibly anywhere to devote itself entirely to the works and scholarship of James Joyce. The New York Joyce Society began in 1947 in the Gotham Book Mart, one of the most unique bookstores in the world. It was in a sense the American version of Shakespeare and Company. In the heart of Manhattan, at 41 West 47th Street, it was the center of the modernist literary movement in the United States, selling rare and out-of-print books as well as the *avant garde* literature of the era to the most sophisticated audience in this country, centered in New York. The clientele were principally book people and theatrical people who lived, worked, and visited in Manhattan, often attracted to the Gotham by its stock of the “little magazines” that were unavailable elsewhere in the country.

Frances Steloff had become the Sylvia Beach of New York, regularly hosting visiting foreign writers as well as Americans, publishers, artists, and academicians at the most prestigious literary gatherings on this side of the Atlantic. Establishing Joyce’s reputation was one of Frances’s principal passions. Having for years sold Joyce’s “Work in Progress” as it appeared serially in *transition*, the Gotham was ready in 1939 for a major publication party for *Finnegans Wake*. Viking

Press, the publisher, cooperated with subsidies for the event and John J. Slocum loaned his fine Joyce collection (now at Yale) for the event, in which scores of literary celebrities participated as mourners and Frances herself as the bereaved widow. W. G. Rogers tells us,

Eugene Jolas later brought back word from Paris that Joyce was amused at the unique wake and pleased with the photographs. . . .

This party, the regular sale of *transition*, and the general Joyceana stacked on the little-magazine racks served to advertise the impression that Joyce headquarters in America was West Forty-seventh Street. . . . Inquiries about the author, his life in Paris, and his baffling and challenging opus kept pouring in. Often an inquisitive admirer walked out of the shop minutes before an expert with all the answers walked in. Frances Steloff decided that for the good of letters they should be brought together. William York Tindall, Columbia's Joyce authority, and an assistant, James Gilvarry, agreed readily to receive students referred to them on a casual basis.<sup>1</sup>

Frances decided something more should be done and,

she proposed to Maurice Speiser, a collector and lawyer, the formation of the regular study group. . . . At his invitation Ben W. Huebsch of Viking, artist-designer E. McKnight Kauffer, John J. Slocum . . . , Gilvarry, Tindall, and Roland von Weber, then playing in a Library Theater production of Joyce's *Exiles*, gathered for an organization meeting. (Rogers 226)

With Slocum as President,

The James Joyce Society was born in the Gotham Book Mart in February and June, 1947, and later incorporated. It aimed to introduce Joyce students to scholars, maintain a Joyce library, further the publications and distribution of his works, encourage the presentation of *Exiles*, and issue occasional bulletins. . . . The first membership in the society was sold to . . . T. S. Eliot. (Rogers 226–27)

Like the evolving international Joyce community as a whole, the Joyce Society was never an exclusively academic enterprise, but

<sup>1</sup> W. G. Rogers, *Wise Men Fish Here: The Story of Frances Steloff and the Gotham Book Mart* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965): 225–26.

included anyone passionately interested in Joyce's work. Padraic Colum succeeded Slocum as President, serving for more than a decade, then William Tindall briefly, and then for nine more years I held the position until I moved to Miami. Sidney Feshbach had the longest run as President and retired only recently, when Nick Fagnoli, the current President, took over.

When I arrived at the Gotham that Bloomsday night in 1961, the first person I saw was Padraic Colum, then the President of the Society. And when I learned that the two speakers that evening who agreed to give up some of their time for me were James T. Farrell and Joseph Campbell, I was overwhelmed. A reading of Farrell's realistic short stories and gritty Chicago novels had convinced me during my sophomore year in the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce to switch over to Penn's College of Liberal Arts and become an English major, and Campbell's work, even apart from the *Skeleton Key*, put him at the pinnacle of scholarly discourse. That night his gloss of an illuminated manuscript of the *Tunc* page of the *Book of Kells*, as represented in the *Wake* was one of the most memorable presentations I have ever heard. I wondered how the audience could ever be even slightly amused, much less impressed, by the musical presentation of a graduate student. But, perhaps inadvertently, one person was responsible for the little but memorable dramatic exchange that came after the presentations and during the discussion period.

Seated among the Joycean luminaries that evening was Jack Dalton, who was known to many older Joyceans as "Nasty Jack." His life was dedicated to correcting the textual mistakes of others, particularly as they regarded *Ulysses*. Jack stood up and indicated in no uncertain terms one or two misreadings of the text in my recording. At the time I didn't know enough to demure gracefully to his challenge. Indeed I didn't know much about anything but the "Lestrygonians" episode, which I had been over literally thousands of times during the previous year in the process of getting every word right on the final tape. In the process, I had memorized the text, and rattled off a long section (with a gloss) of it in rebuttal. Dalton had carried a copy of *Ulysses* under his arm for so long it seemed like a growth in his armpit, and when he opened the text to quote the chapter and verse he found out that I was right. He apologized and that began a long association between us through the ensuing years of his turbulent professional career. He was a superb musician, I was later to learn, as well as an organist and choir director, and a collector of nineteenth

century first editions, so we always had a lot to talk about after we were done arguing about *Ulysses*.

At any rate, I really owed most of whatever success I had later in my professional career to that night at the James Joyce Society meeting. I drove back to New Jersey after it was over, and by ten o'clock the next morning was out flounder fishing in Barnegat Bay. Was that to be the end of the line? The Gotham was the only place in the East at the time to carry a full stock of the "little literary magazines" from Europe and the States that formed the impetus for what we think of as High Modernism. Next to where they were shelved I had seen the night before a display of literary recordings including one or two albums of Joyce Society meetings at the Gotham. Back on the Bay, I thought that the time might be now or never, and docked the boat with three dead but uncleaned flounders still in it, grabbed the tapes of the chapter, and headed back to the Gotham, where I arrived still in my fishing cut-offs and tee shirt. I was examining the recording racks to find out which companies I might get hold of to audition the tape, when Frances, who rarely left the store in those days, asked if she could help. She hadn't recognized me in my summer fishing attire, despite my corpulent proportions, and when I told her I had been on the program the previous night, and was looking for a place that might audition my tapes, she remembered my presentation, and was exceptionally complimentary about it. She walked over to the phone, dialed Moses Ash, and told him that she thought Folkways Records would be interested in taking it on. She sent me to their offices only a block or two down the street, where Ash listened to my tapes, and agreed on the spot to publish them. He gave me a small advance for the two-disk album, and a verbal commitment to publish every other chapter I produced. Four additional albums came out of that agreement.

But that was not all that evening at the Joyce Society did to help me on my way. Several years later, after I had become a member and a regular at meetings and Padraic Colum and I had become close friends, we spent hours discussing his part in the Irish Literary Renaissance. I was so fascinated that I decided to write the first book on his career. I wrote to Harry Moore, asking him, as Editor of Southern Illinois University Press's Cross Currents Series, if he would entertain a proposal for my Colum book. Harry wrote back that he was in the Gotham that first night, had heard and liked my presentation, and would be delighted to give me a contract. He also offered to

send me an advance along with the contract, the only advance on a book I ever received in the forty years and ten volumes to follow.

The point to all of this is not to exult in my own luck, but to call attention to what such literary associations can produce, and the sort of great people who choose to offer their friendship and aid to others, even at the beginning of their careers, in their celebration of the art of James Joyce. That sense of inclusion and help for neophytes as well as established figures has always permeated Joyce studies and its associated organizations in direct contradiction to many other scholarly interest groups. It is what especially characterizes Joyceans as a whole, and certainly the James Joyce Society.

More than fifty years later the Joyce Society continues to flourish, with three or four meetings a year upstairs in the Gotham Book Mart in the Anna Livia Room, and substantially retains a mixture of members, both academic and otherwise. Through the twenty-five years when I was in regular attendance at Society meetings, a host of great Joyceans were always present, including many who made critical history even though they were not full-time academics. Most notable were Ruth Von Phul, whose brief, if scatologically oriented, comments opened the Freud/Joyce connection. Ruth was not an academic, but a professional Joyce reader, who left a 5000 page manuscript of *Wake* explication when she died, along with scores of short articles. Max Halper, an art dealer with businesses in New York and Provincetown, was another member whose splenetic, often comic, commentaries on the *Wake* both enlightened and delighted us. Frances' lawyer in her many battles with censorship, Morris Ernst, was another regular member. He had argued the most celebrated obscenity case in American literary history in defending Random House's publication of *Ulysses*, and frequently delivered his reminiscences on the legalities associated with Joyce. Other Society regulars included Vicky Pomerantz, Edmund Epstein, Heyward Erlich, Bob Day, Milton Malkin, and the ever loyal Myra Russell, principally responsible for the permanent interest in *Chamber Music*. For ten years or more, *avant garde* film maker Mary Ellen Bute sat on the front row of Society meetings. Her full-length film, *Passages from "Finnegans Wake,"* was adapted from the Barnard College production of Mary Manning's work by the same name. Conceived and carried on in concert with Frances Steloff, Padraic Colum, and other Joyce Society members, it remains the most innovative cinematic interpretation of the spirit of Joyce's last work ever attempted. The person responsible for the

whole ongoing Joyce Society program was Philip Lyman, manager of the Gotham, and the most devoted Joycean who ever attended a meeting anywhere. Then there were the celebrity speakers, authors like Thornton Wilder and actors like Burgess Meredith, who came to meetings when they were in town. The list could go on and on.

I think there has to be something in Joyce and his work that particularly attracts general readers and scholars alike to his humor, his intellectual achievement, and his egalitarian outlook on life. The Joyce Society is a microcosm of the larger Joyce community: the most open, honest, lively, fun-loving group of people who ever focused their commonality on a single author, living or dead. For us Joyce is a way of life.