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An Irish Diary

Molly coddled – Frank McNally on the real-life backstory of Joyce’s Molly Bloom

For a novelist James Joyce was notoriously reluctant to make stuff up



Amelia Capacete: was she the inspiration for Molly Bloom? Photograph: courtesy Murphy family

It’s not often that the dedication on a book’s flyleaf contains a scoop, journalistic or literary. But there may have been such a rarity at the launch of Fran O’Rourke’s *Joyce, Aristotle, and Aquinas* on Wednesday. For the work was officially dedicated to his nieces Maeve and Aisling, and to Aisling’s baby daughter Saoirse, who are all described as descendants of a real-life “Molly Bloom”.

Joycean Studies is an empire on which the sun never sets. At any moment, around the globe, an army of literary detectives armed with PhDs are poring over the man's life and work, especially Ulysses.

And until recently, the consensus on his most famous female character was that while her personality derived largely from his wife Nora Barnacle, the rest was a composite of other women with some invention, including her backstory of birth in Gibraltar to a Spanish mother and a British army father.

Joyce was notoriously reluctant for a novelist to make stuff up. He preferred the magpie-like collection of details from real life, to be recycled and reassembled as required. And it now emerges that even the semi-exotic origins of Molly Bloom may have been gathered on the streets of the north inner-city Dublin he walked as a young man.

A pivotal figure in this scenario is his favourite aunt, Josephine Giltrap, aka Mrs William Murray, who in 1904 lived at no 113 North Strand Road (where the fire station is now). The young Joyce valued her opinion on many matters, including his then-new love affair. Crucially, he even stayed with her for part of that summer.

Meanwhile, a few doors away at No 103, there resided one Bernard Connor, a former sergeant major in the British army, and his wife Amelia Capacete, born (as Emilia) in San Roque, Spain, who married him in nearby Gibraltar.

The couple's children included Elizabeth, of similar age to Joyce and notably musical. And in this confluence of mother and daughter we may have both the fictional Molly's backstory and the germs of her career as a singer.

The link to O'Rourke, emeritus professor of philosophy at UCD (still working hard in official retirement) is via his brother Seán, of RTÉ fame. Seán is married to Caroline Murphy, whose voice will be well known to many from years of doing What it Says in the Papers.

And it is she and her Murphy cousins who primarily descend from Amelia, via Elizabeth, a fact they suspect was known to their fathers but wilfully forgotten in an era when connections to Joyce's "dirty" book were less prized than today. A copy of Ulysses lurked quietly in at least one Murphy household, for example, highly unusual at that time.

The story began to re-emerge back in 2016, after two of the cousins, Mary Rose and Ann, began asking questions. For Mary Rose, there was even a Joycean epiphany one Bloomsday, when she chanced upon some American tourists dressed as Molly. She berated herself for knowing so little about this character who so fascinated others, then started digging and realised she had a shareholding in the real thing.

Ann, meanwhile, sought the help of a friend and Joycean, Barry Sheehan, one of a small group of eccentrics, your diarist included, who (a) have read Ulysses and (b) run a lot.

What is even more unusual is that Barry combines those two activities and documents them on a website, JJ21K.com, in which he devises half-marathon routes (hence the 21k) on Joycean themes.

He is currently working on the ingenious idea of a 21km race in which the merely athletic would be handicapped by 21 questions about Joyce, with time added or deducted

accordingly. Don't tell anyone, but if this event ever happens, I will not merely enter, I may also have a sneaky bet on myself with any bookie willing to give odds.

In the meantime, Sheehan has researched the Murphy story. And while he says it could be remarkable coincidence, he thinks that unlikely.

Among other telling details, even Amelia Capacete's birthplace is echoed in Molly's soliloquy, via her unpunctuated memories: "I love to see a regiment pass in review the first time I saw the Spanish cavalry at La Roque it was lovely after looking across the bay from Algeciras all the lights of the rock like fireflies."

O'Rourke's book is in all good bookshops and may also be bought, along with the lemon soap, in Sweny's Pharmacy. It was officially launched by John Banville, formerly of this parish, who described it as a "delight", adding candidly that there were not many scholarly books about which he could use that word.

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