

James Joyce Singer
Fran O'Rourke

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William Bulfin's delightful book, *Rambles in Eirinn*, is an account of the author's travels on bicycle throughout Ireland. One of those trips took place on Sunday 12 September 1904, when he and a friend headed south towards Wicklow. Before reaching Dalkey, Bulfin's companion mentioned that there were 'two men living in a tower down somewhere to the left who were creating a sensation in the neighbourhood'. He suggested paying them a visit. Soon they found themselves climbing a steep ladder which led to the door of the tower. "We entered, and found some men of Ireland in possession, with whom we tarried until far on in the morning. One of them had lately returned from a canoeing tour of hundreds of miles through the rivers and canals of Ireland; another was reading for a Trinity College degree, and assiduously wooing the muses; and another was a singer of songs which spring from the deepest currents of life.' The singer was James Joyce, who stayed with his friend Oliver St John Gogarty in the Martello Tower in Sandycove for six days in September 1904.

Joyce set the opening of *Ulysses* on the roof of the tower, some months earlier on June 16th, because, **as everyone surely knows?** -- he wanted to immortalise the day when he first went walking out with Nora Barnacle, a beautiful girl from Galway. The week before, on June 8, Joyce took part in a musical soirée, as reported by the diarist Joseph Holloway: 'Mr J. Joyce, a strangely aloof, silent youth, with weird, penetrating eyes, which he frequently shaded with his hand and with a half-bashful, far-away expression on his face, sang some dainty old world ballads most artistically and pleasingly. Later he sat in a corner and gazed at us all in turn in an uncomfortable way from under his brows and said little or nothing all the evening. He is a strange boy. I cannot forget him.'

Later that summer Nora Barnacle herself heard James in a concert in The Antient Concert Rooms, Great Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street). One of the songs he sang was Yeats's poem "Salley

Gardens”, set to a traditional air. We cannot be sure if the air he used was the one popular today, or that of ‘Far Beyond the Mountains’, to which Yeats’s poem had also been set. John McCormack sang in that concert, the only occasion when Joyce and McCormack shared the concert platform. There is a myth that Joyce came second to McCormack in the Feis Ceoil. The truth is that, while they both competed in the Feis, they did so in different years. McCormack won first prize in the tenor section in 1903, and was awarded a scholarship to study in Italy. Hoping to pursue a similar career, Joyce competed the following year. He sang the prescribed song, “A Long Farewell”, a translation of “Slán le Máigh”, written by the 18th century hedge school master Aindrias MacCraith. Joyce’s performance drew favourable comment. The *Daily Independent* wrote: ‘Mr Joyce showed himself possessed of the finest quality voice of any of those competing.’ The critic James Cousins stated: “At the Feis I heard a young man with light pompadour hair and hardish grey eyes render ‘A Long Farewell’ seraphically.” Joyce later parodied the song in *Finnegans Wake*: ‘My long farewell I send to you, fair dream of sport and game and always something new. Gone is Haun! My grief, my ruin! Our Joss-el-Jovan! Our Chris-na-Murty!’.

For his performance at the Feis the judge intended to award him first prize, but because Joyce was unable to sight-read (throwing the sheet music in the air and walking off) he received **only** third prize. Another myth has it that Joyce threw the bronze medal into the Liffey. The truth is that, since he could not pawn it, he brought it home and tossed it in disgust into his aunt’s lap, saying, ‘You can have it, Aunt Josephine. I have no use for it.’ It was acquired at auction in London one hundred years later for more than £14,000 **by one Michael Flatley.**

When James Joyce died in Zurich in January 1941, Nora placed a wreath in the shape of a harp on her husband’s grave in Fluntern Cemetery.

This was more than the sentimental gesture of an Irish exile. She remarked: 'I made this shape for my Jim who loved music so much.' There was a tender irony here, in light of her sometime remark: 'Jim should have stuck to the singing instead of bothering with writing.' Over the years **Nora** obviously changed her opinion regarding her husband's literary merit. She boasted: 'Ah, there's only one man he's got to get the better of now, and that's that Shakespeare.'