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Frances Devlin-Glass

Joyce, Bloomsday, and Diasporic Identity: A Report from Melbourne

James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is arguably the most-discussed novel of the twentieth century. A keystone of modernism, it often appears on “best books” lists, Irish or otherwise. Yet, *Ulysses* also surely ranks among the least read of canonical works. Some Joycean scholars have admitted as much: Morris Beja declared that the “books [are] so difficult that nobody really reads them. Or if anyone does, they’re only English professors.”¹ An even more extreme position was proposed nearly thirty years ago by Colin McCabe, a psychoanalytic critic who, in a colorful rhetorical flourish, doubted the existence of readers beyond the author himself:

[Joyce] entertained some notion of the common reader to whom his texts would be available. But this purely imaginary audience did not exist and the real audience to whom the texts are thus necessarily addressed is an isolated individual and the only possible individual: Joyce himself.²

In a more recent book on the so-called “Joyce wars,” Julie Sloan Brannon acknowledges the appropriation of Joyce by an elite of scholars. She believes the process began as long ago as the 1921 *Little Review* pornography case, which drove a wedge between erudite, literarily trained personnel who could not be morally “polluted” by the novel and a more general reading public who were not likely to persist with it. She demonstrates how *Ulysses*, to get past the censors, mobilized respected academic opinions, and in the process disempowered the “common reader.”³ Brannon argues that, subsequently, the disputes over editions of the novel entrenched the gulf between academe and the nonacademic reader. Broadcast and print media—in Australia and Ireland, certainly, and one assumes elsewhere—routinely enlarge this gulf around June 16 each year. The


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predictable querying of readership and canonical gambits, often presented humorously, fills columns and apparently sells copies.

However, a study of the largely nonliterary readership who attend Bloomsday celebrations in Melbourne, Australia, finds that such scholars as Brannon and McCabe are mistaken about Joyce’s constituency. A peripatetic festival, each year Melbourne’s Bloomsday Festival has explored a different aspect of Ulysses through formal seminar and panel discussions, as well as in theater and “street theater.” Moreover, the responses of these nonspecialists also probe the extent to which interest in the matter of Ireland is a motive for reading Joyce. Are there any differences between the experience of Irish-Australian readers, Irish-born readers, and those with no particular reasons for identifying with Ireland? And what role does reading Joyce and attending Bloomsday play in diasporic examinations of identity formation by Irish immigrants and Irish Australians?

The empirical data presented here comes from three sources. The first of these is a detailed questionnaire distributed, largely by mail, to persons on the “Bloomsday in Melbourne” mailing lists (some 250 of them, of whom 71 responded). The questionnaire sought information about how, when, and why the individuals started reading Joyce, the extent of their reading, the challenges they face in reading him, and the extent to which participation in Bloomsday assisted their reading and understanding. The questionnaire included both structured and unstructured questions. Its detail and length (thirty-four questions, many soliciting qualitative data) meant that the group was a self-selecting one. Less “Joyce-literate” readers reported anecdotally that the questionnaire was too daunting. Table 1 provides data on the national identification and educational level of the respondents to the survey. The second set of data comes from interviews and focus groups conducted with ten respondents to the questionnaire, who volunteered for follow-up interviews. These investigations sought more detailed information about participants’ personal investments in the specifically Irish dimensions of Joyce’s novels.

5. I need to make clear that I am not a disinterested observer of the Melbourne events, as I have been a key organizer of the celebrations over the fourteen-year period in which they have existed. Further, as an Irish Australian whose identity formation has occurred largely through my commitment to Irish literature, rather than through family or schooling, I am frankly curious about what this means for me and for others. The Bloomsday community, though a small population, is a rich site for investigating such matters.
Finally, some of the information presented here is found in a set of short papers, available on the internet, delivered at the Bloomsday seminar for Antipodean Joyce (“Live-It or Cricket”) in 2000, where nonspecialist supporters of “Bloomsday in Melbourne,” called the “First Eleven,” described their personal engagement with *Ulysses.*

The seminar participants were a mixed group: they included a theater director/actor, a psychoanalyst, a consultant in organizational change, and the politician Barry Jones. Only one respondent could be considered an academic, and he was not studying literary criticism.

Of the Australians in the cohort, half identified themselves as Irish-Australian. Only thirteen Irish-born individuals were in the sample, or 18 percent. Taken together, the Irish and Irish Australians constituted more than half the

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Table 1

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The majority of respondents were more than forty years old (89% of males and 97% of females). They were overwhelmingly college-educated, with 83% holding a first college degree and 39% with a higher degree. They were engaged in a great diversity of occupations, among them librarians, doctors, nurses and medical professionals, lawyers, four psychologists, a farmer, a winemaker, engineers, IT professionals, both literary and journalistic writers, bureaucrats and secretaries, seven teachers (all but one of whom was retired), and academics from such disciplines as law, education, physics and philosophy. The Irish-born were more likely than their Australian counterparts to have earned a degree—often in Australia—though the Australians were more likely to have completed, or be engaged in, a postgraduate qualification.

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7. Jones is a former minister in the Australian Commonwealth government, with a reputation as a polymath.
sample. Although the information was not directly requested in the questionnaire, of those identifying themselves as being Australian with Irish background, none were born in Ireland, and many noted that they traced their ancestry back several generations (three people were one generation removed; four claimed two generations; two were three generations removed; and one each claimed four- and five-generation lineages). Many respondents, thus, constructed the Irish portion of their identity as persisting over generations.

Among the Irish-born, a different way of marking identity can be observed. Some tended to label themselves Irish in the questionnaires, but in discussion made the point that because they had taken Australian citizenship they should therefore be thought of as Irish-Australian: one characterized the quandary of her identity by saying that she was “Irish by birth and English by marriage and Australian by choice.” Several respondents noted that they did not begin to claim the Irish part of their identity until the concept of multiculturalism began to enter public discussion in the 1970s in Australia. Others claimed their Irishness arose in response to the Irish folk music phenomenon.

Even allowing for the disparity in the size of the subpopulations, the Irish-born are more likely than the Australians to have first encountered Joyce as independent readers or through an event like the Melbourne Bloomsday. The Australians and Irish-Australians, by contrast, are more likely to have first studied the novels at university, or, in the case of Australians, to have read Portrait at school. The Irish-born readers tell a story of censorship and of having had to
work to gain access to the novel: one, for instance, recalls. “When my mother in Ireland would hide censored books, I would search for them...[it] whetted appetite to delve, to scandalize my relatives.”

Joyce's iconoclasm, and his reputation for obscenity, were also widely known to this readership before they began reading. More often than not, these sensational aspects constituted an invitation to read the author. Irish and Irish-Australian respondents are more likely than others to mention that they knew the text was banned or “scandalous”: one Irish-born woman claimed that at school in Ireland she had been aware of his reputation as an “antichrist” and that it was “exciting” to finally get access to *Ulysses* when she worked in England. Shane Conway, a doctor and panelist for the First Eleven seminar, first encountered *Ulysses* when he was counseled not to write about it for a religion prize at school, as it would offend the bishop who was to present the award; he subsequently almost derailed his medical degree reading systematically and obsessively the whole of Joyce.

Figure 2 shows the range of reasons respondents gave for reading Joyce, which focus predominantly on his literary innovativeness, the humor of the

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8. As the questionnaire responses were anonymous, I have not attributed this or subsequent quotations to individuals who would be identified only by a number. A total of twenty-five respondents are quoted in this article. Survey materials are in the possession of the author.

9. “Live-It or Cricket” site, No. 6, “A Journey with James Joyce.”
novels, and Irish features of the works. Notably, all but one reader approached Joyce as already freighted with literary significance as a canonical writer. The third-highest-ranking reason for reading Joyce relates to the Irishness of Joyce’s novels. The distribution of reasons is similar for both the Irish respondents and the Australians who identify no Irish heritage. However, for the Irish-Australians, a different dynamic seems to be in play: they are more likely to report interest in the Irish dimension of Joyce’s novels as a reason for reading Joyce and attending Bloomsday.

Of Irish-born readers, only half nominated Irishness as a reason that led them to become readers of Joyce. This seems to be a counterintuitive finding, and there may be many reasons for this: perhaps identity became an issue only after emigration, or, being an older group, perhaps this group can take for granted their knowledge of the Ireland that Joyce refracts in his texts. One commented that the negative portrayals of Ireland, and especially Northern Irish turbulence, in the Australian press in the early years of her migration (in the mid-1970s) initiated her questioning of what it was to be Irish; another cited her negative experiences as an Irishwoman in England, something which was not replicated in the Australian context. The contrast allowed her to engage in the process Stuart Hall describes in relation to African Caribbean enforced diasporas, that of “imposing] an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation.”

The apparent disavowal of Irishness as a motive for reading Joyce was to some extent counteracted by the qualitative comments given by Irish-born women readers. These answers made it clear that cultural affirmation—and the dynamic personal revaluation of negative ethnically-based Otherness and difference, often expressed in terms of cultural stereotypes of sexual identity or religiosity—that they had uncritically internalized as constituent of Irish identity was, indeed, an important factor in attracting them to Joyce’s work. Many were pleased to be able to read a book that had been denied them as young readers in Ireland. These women explicitly use Joyce as a way of critiquing the sexual morality and inherited religious views of their own culture, and in the process, gaining an objective distance from those attitudes. They signal this in the countercultural glee with which many defy the description of Ulysses as a “dirty” and “banned” book, and in the ways they talk about their religious

10. On the topic of what the patrons have read, how and why they read, and the challenges Joyce poses for them as readers and how they overcome them, see Frances Devlin-Glass, “Who ‘Curls up’ with Ulysses? A Study of Non-Conscripted Readers of Joyce,” James Joyce Quarterly, 41, 3 (Spring, 2004), 363-80.
defections from, and often, re-engagements with, Catholicism. One described *Ulysses* as “an altercation with the absurd in which the tentacles of conservatism and prudishness are taken out to dinner and voraciously devoured.”

Respondents often linked the scandalous reputation of the novel with their own personal narrative about a loss of faith, or a renegotiation of belief. Various Irish-born respondents talked about their religious journeys into lapsed or “slightly lapsed” Catholicism, or atheism. One detailed the process of finding “peace with [her] rejection of the church” and indicated a distinctly adversarial engagement on religious grounds with Joyce, making pointed comments about how Joyce failed to achieve her own level of self-acceptance as an ex-Catholic:

He was a very clever man as far as literature was concerned but he never really grew up, either spiritually or sexually. He was never “at peace” with his rejection of the Church. I am, and I don’t see it as rejection—just development and metamorphosis.

Such stories, which touch on issues of identity formation, reveal that certain readers actively use Joyce to think through both orthodox and unorthodox Irish identity formations—both at a psychic level, and in terms of their nationalist discursive formations. This appears especially so in relation to religious identity.

More often than not, it is Joyce’s realism that drew the Irish-born cohort into his fiction. Commonly, Irish immigrants report having come to Joyce for identity-affirmation only after leaving an Ireland where they did not need to reflect on identity. One Dubliner born in Holles Street hospital (which as the setting of “Oxen of the Sun” is something of sacred site for Joyceans), who had not encountered Joyce before she left school in 1974, first engaged with *Ulysses* as a migrant in Australia recognizing that Joyce had made her Dublin known and important around the world. As a schoolgirl, the nuns who taught had inculcated piety as the chief reason to value her Irish culture. The novel powerfully challenged that interpretation. She recognized in Joyce a depiction of the ordinary, urban Dublin that resonated with her own experience of inner Dublin, and as a result she began to take a different kind of pride in her culture—and used the novel as a means to introduce it to her Asian husband and teenagers, who had never previously shown even a remote interest in Ireland. She also valued *Ulysses* for the status and sense of accomplishment that reading such a difficult work conferred on her. She commented that three-quarters of her friends back in Dublin had still not encountered the novel, and made much of the fact that she was a nurse with no literary training.

A related theme is that of the need that Taylor describes as a drive to “purge themselves of [an] imposed and destructive identity,” specifically that of Irish
in inferiority. One telling narrative was that of a Dubliner who closely identified with Joyce as an exile. He reflected on his shift in identity as an Irishman over time—how being ashamed of his identity as a teenager had changed to pride in his heritage, and how through his reading of Joyce, of Irish history, and his attentiveness to Irish broadcasts over the internet, he had changed his perceptions. In this instance, the movement away from Ireland to rediscover it through Joyce replicates Joyce’s own trajectory, in which becoming an exile enabled a sharper understanding of identity and difference. This patron was one of many in his use of Joyce to negotiate misrecognition of national identity.

Joyce’s realism constitutes a nostalgic and redefining diasporic moment for Irish-born readers. They draw heavily on the realism of the novel as a way of imaginatively returning to Dublin: the novels function as an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson’s term. One self-identified as a working-class Dubliner who sought to hear in Ulysses the sounds of the Dublin she had left. Another commented that the novel “helps me to forget about cultural alienation.” The Dublin- or Irish-born respondents display a clear sense of ownership of the texts: they speak with confidence of “understand[ing] where he is coming from” of being put “in touch with Irish characters and their particular idiosyncrasies” as if in the fiction they were meeting people they thought of as real. Another commented, “I’m like Joyce. I never left the city. I need the fix.” She relates in a “very personal” way to Joyce’s focus on Dublin, and she speaks of his “love/hate relationship” with the city, an orientation she identifies as sharing. The processes enacted in these nostalgic imaginative returns to their common idealized origins by means of reading Joyce are well described by Stuart Hall, in his examination of why identity remains so persistent in a globalizing world:

Though they seem to evoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to respond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation.

The respondents are actively involved not just in a return to roots, but also in using Joyce to narrativize the newly perceived complexity of those Irish cultur-
al traditions, and in a process whereby they re-imagine themselves in relation to new and more dignifying constructions of nationalism. They draw on Joyce’s representations to reshape their own relationship to personal histories and cultural belonging.

A reader from Northern Ireland reveals the complex ways that Joyce invites him to consider identity issues. He was aware that “nostalgia” and “romanticism” were important motives for reading Joyce:

For me it is entirely personal. *Ulysses* and *Dubliners* bring back the Ireland and in particular the Dublin that I used to visit. I can recognize and relate to the characters, even down to Bloom’s love of kidneys . . . though Dublin has changed, the Dublin I visited the 1950s and 1960s was not that much different from that of Bloom. . . . Joyce has encouraged me to enjoy the sound of the English language as spoken by the Irish. To some extent this was complemented by a resurgence in Irish folk music in the 1960s. . . . He brings back the sounds, smells, aspirations, sadness of Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century.

Later, in a focus group, the same respondent made clear that his Protestant Belfast also had affinities with Joyce’s Dublin, especially in its poverty: he was the son of a middle-class, Protestant small businessman whose shop was in a predominantly Catholic area. His conflicted identity is reflected in the way that he maps a shift in his identity since coming to Australia; when living in Northern Ireland he saw himself as “British with Irish overtones,” but now describes himself as “Irish with British overtones.” Politically, his trajectory was to become “disgusted with both sides in Northern Ireland” after the outbreak of sectarian violence. It seems that he used the novel to grieve for what appeared to be unbearable hopelessness and frustrated dreams in the embattled community of Others that he left: Gerty McDowell’s unfulfilled dreams of marriage and Molly Bloom’s failure to become the opera singer she would love to be seem unbearably sad to him. His mature “conversations with Joyce” have a distinctly Marxist slant, which does not seem to have been available to him as a younger person. An engineer by profession, this reader is a self-professed nonliterary person and resists literary criticism; he comments that “The more I read Joyce’s works the more I cease to be a reader but more a participant . . .”

Although he insists that *Ulysses* delivers the Ireland of his youth to him, he is also aware of its omissions (among them Gaelic, hurley, and Wyndham’s land reform of 1903). He debates with himself the issue of whether Irishness is “a tool” or an end in itself, and whether Joyce should be appreciated for his universality. He concedes that “if Joyce was not Irish, I would not have persevered with *Ulysses*.” The textual specificities of Joyce’s time and place—understood as real—are an important touchstone for him. Another Irish-born participant is conscious of using the novel to “understand and appreciate [her] own Irish-
ness”; but most of the Irish-born seem to take an essentialist position on what Irishness means, and not one that views it as negotiable—even though many of them report dynamic shifts in their own construction of their cultural identity. One, for instance, described the convoluted and circumlocutory nature of the language in Joyce as “quintessentially Irish.” On the whole, these Irish-born readers do not consciously problematize Irishness, or consider that it might have changed since Joyce wrote—or if they do, it is implicit, as in the case of the Belfast middle-class man whose sympathies with the working class are elicited by Joyce.

Irish-born patrons are more likely than others to dispute the notion that the novel is difficult, or that it provides obstacles for reading. They assume their Irishness is a defense against the notorious difficulty of *Ulysses*. One commented that “Older Irish-born ‘know’ Joyce on a different level [than] academic study,” and another claimed “We are both Irish. I understand where he is coming from, even though I don’t always agree with him.” The Irish-born cohort also displays a degree of jealous ownership of the text, especially when it is read or performed. They are troubled when non-Irish assume Irish accents that are not accurate; one said, “the cadences of Joyce’s Dublin have died and certainly are not transferable to Australian speakers.” However, a high percentage, 85 percent of the Irish-born, express support for hearing the text, much higher than among the Australians and Irish-Australians, for whom only two-thirds support oral performance. The Irish-born patrons are inclined to prefer simple unmediated readings of text rather than dramatizations or theatricalizations that engage critically with the text.15 One, who has been reading Joyce for forty years, described her attitude as that of a “Joyce purist.” One of “Bloomsday in Melbourne’s” most controversial practices among this population is that of making Joyce’s work local, drawing connections between Melbourne and Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century. One patron who had attended Bloomsday events in both Melbourne and Dublin wrote testily that

*I cannot see how making Joyce “Australian” or any other nationality, works to extend Joyce. Its very centre is Ireland, the works are Irish. These are the core areas to understand in order to be able to appreciate (understand) respect [sic] what Joyce is about. There is some danger in universalizing Joyce as if a panacea for contemporary issues.*

Another patron, the “purist” mentioned above—although generally appreciative of both Joyce as a “genius” and of “Bloomsday in Melbourne” as a critical spur to advances in her understanding of Joyce—expressed concern that such events

15. For a discussion of the liberties that Bloomsday in Melbourne takes with Joyce’s text, see Devlin-Glass, “‘Bloomsdaying’: Joyce in Performance.”
can sometimes hinder an understanding of the text “because of poetic license with interpretations.” She added,

I find some interpretations culturally offensive—especially when devised by non-Irish who have shallow interpretations and cannot comprehend the underlying richness. The result is sometimes a caricature reinforcing British invented stereotypical views of the Irish. It’s an insidious type of ridicule.

Such dissenting comments enact a robust, even combative sense of ownership of the text—characteristically, a sense of ownership come to relatively late, and in places remote from Ireland. The comments probably need to be read within the context of the respondent’s strong sense of Irish difference, and memories of colonialist injustice: “I hate it when people say that the Irish lack logic—as though there was only one way to view the Universe. Joyce’s way of writing reinforces Irishness. I find that liberating.”

Irish Australians appear to read Joyce and attend Bloomsday for some of the same reasons as their Irish-born counterparts but also for subtly different reasons, and to experience it differently. As a group, they were more likely to avow an interest in the matter of Ireland as part of their motivation for reading Joyce, and in qualitative comments, there is a tendency to read “Joyce” as interchangeable with “Ireland,” as in this comment: “My love of Ireland and my many visits to Ireland leave me with a leaning towards Ireland and things Irish, such as Bloomsday.” They talk in general ways of “affinity for his culture (reflected in the rise/fall/rise of my family’s fortunes),” and of being motivated as a result of their reading in Joyce to learn more of Irish history, politics, and culture. One called it “entertainment of an intellectual kind,” while another, more aware of Joyce’s critique of Ireland, notes that “Joyce allows the Irish subconscious to erupt; I don’t think he is mistaken.” This respondent relishes Joyce’s “iconoclasm of all things Irish that are held by the Irish in such reverence, but not necessarily in a justified way.” Only a small minority of the Irish Australians, 16 percent of the entire sample, saw their reading as confirming, enacting, or engaging with Joyce’s critique of Irishness and of the mores of 1904 Ireland.

In the focus groups and follow-up questionnaires, the Irish-Australian patrons’ reasons for reading Joyce often take a personal, sentimental, and even nostalgic turn. They are also more inclined to be drawn to Joyce’s oppositional stance toward religion and nation. In these respects, two participants were of particular interest. Both were historians with a broad and deep investment in Australian and Irish history. They shared a sense of *Ulysses* as enacting both Irish history and autobiographical history. One participant, well aware of Joyce’s canonical status, originally sought to rediscover in the novels the storytelling ability of a loved father. He confidently asserts that the novels constitute a “most marvelous and true depiction of the Irish psyche” and that “inter alia Joyce was
writing a very personal history of Ireland, both factual and mythological, an allegory of Irish history.”

This is echoed by another participant, who says that he in effect revisits his Irish grandfather and mentor—the person who most contributed to his Irish-Australian identity—in the pages of Joyce, and especially in the “Cyclops” chapter that deals extensively with Irish history. However, a former reader also documents in detail the ways in which, over time, Joyce has led her into an Ireland she did not expect, and a subversion of the “preferred and respectable” Irish identity that she romantically espoused at a younger age. With time, she has come to respect Joyce’s portrayals of strugglers and survivors, his definition of Irishness that is wider than a narrowly Catholic one, his more feminized version of Irish identity, and Joyce’s representation of “déclassé” Irish sensibilities like Stephen’s.

Unsurprisingly, many in the Irish-Australian group had religious motivations for being familiar with Joyce: “Joyce and particularly Portrait was regarded as indispensable by many of my fellow [Jesuit] seminarians,” said one. For this respondent, as for many others in this cohort and also the Irish-born, Joyce’s critique of Catholicism carried the most importance: “his sharp, anthropological view of Irish culture and particularly Irish Catholicism . . . has helped to change my relationship to the religion in which I grew up.” Being exposed to Joyce in performance changed the frame within which they read particular religious phenomena, both in life and in the novel. One woman comments, for example, that she initially read the sermons of Portrait with a sense of horror and anger, and that this turned to amusement and outright laughter in a performance at Port Melbourne in 2000. That performance was conducted in a Catholic church using an actor in full priestly costume, who played the sermon relatively straight but who acted in a slightly manic style in terms of subtle eye-work and voice intonations.

“I drifted by instinct and curiosity into Dubliners,” reports one Irish-Australian patron, “and then with reservations into the rest. It at once was and was not part of my mind’s native soil.” This is one of the most important differences between the cohorts. The Irish-Australian patrons read to explore or reclaim a heritage that has been to some extent devalued by the mainstream culture—in Australia, Irish identity does not have the same cachet that it does in the United States—but also to register their distance from that identity. Trish ní Ivor, one of the “First Eleven,” comments,

I love the Catholic references, the underlying rituals of daily life which define a culture and its inhabitants. I love the Irishness of Joyce’s enmity towards the English and the echoes of my own father and maiden aunts in his turn of phrase. I love his smart-arsedness as he demonstrates his literacy in western thought and archetype, politics and writing, high life and low. … But [other portions] of this
background were simply out of date for me. No matter how important some of
the finer points of canonical law or theological debate may have been to western
culture early this century, the events of World Wars, of ecumenism post-Vatican
Council II, of multi-culturalism and global economies have rendered these once
passionate arguments to a significance now no greater than a backroom of
Jesuits arguing over the numbers of angels on the heads of pins.  

Three focus group members who were Irish-Australian spoke of not having
begun to conceive of themselves as specifically Irish Australians—as distinct
from Australians—until the 1970s and 1980s. The critical factors for them were
the era of state-sanctioned multiculturalism, which peaked during the 1970s,
and the Aboriginal rights movement that gained momentum in 1988, the bicen-
tennial of European settlement in Australia. The problematics of Aboriginal loss
of land as a result of British colonialism, and the parallel with Irish history
became manifest to them. For these respondents, reclaiming Joyce, reading and
rereading, and attending Bloomsday were forms of witness to a specifically
Irish-Australian identity that had untethered itself from Irish Catholicism.

There is evidence that the Irish-Australian and Australian patrons are
engaged in experiencing the text in the ways that are self-consciously hybrid and
dialogical. They appear to be playing with what Stuart Hall calls “a conception
of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.”
Whereas the Irish-born in their comments prefer the performances of Joyce’s
work to be unadulterated and not made local, the Australian and Irish-Aus-
tralian cohorts more often approve of Bloomsday in Melbourne’s attempts to
make Joyce relevant to Australia in the present or to compare the two colonial
histories. One respondent, for example, seeks through Bloomsday both to cel-
brate Joyce and variants of Irish culture and also “to connect Joyce with Mel-
bourne/their city and lives.” This group, too, most values the peripatetic nature
of Melbourne Bloomsdays and its forays into historical and unusual cityscapes,
and its members are also more likely than the Irish-born respondents to be ser-
ial attendees. But why?

Commonly, the Irish-Australian respondents give literary reasons; but the
questionnaire responses make clear that they feel they belong to an Ireland- or
Joyce-focused community. They profess to feel part of a “convivial” group, a “lit-
erary family,” or to sense a “corporate feeling” arising from a “bond with other
Joyce readers” and the “sharing of a particular passion [for Joyce].” They often
express their engagement in the language of carnival and indulge in mild self-
mockery: they describe themselves as “buffs enjoying an in-joke” and “sharing

17. Taylor, p. 32.
in open secrets that are freely available”; enjoy “the company I’m forced to keep and the audacity of it”; and say of their fellow Bloomsday celebrators that “it’s almost as if they are observing a religious rite.”

They are also inclined to view Bloomsday as unapologetically exotic, describing the patrons as a group of “obsessives,” or a “cult,” or an “eccentric sub-society,” among whom they enjoy lurking and on whom they like to spy. They want to “see what other Joyce readers look like,” and to be part of a “tradition.” One participant talks with relish of “thumbing one’s nose at the Ascendancy,” though any sense of the Joycean celebrations as being part of an Irish or political assembly is, in fact, muted; or if expressed, it is the Australian-born and not the Irish-Australians who refer to “mad Irish” or who assume that most other attendees have Irish links or identity.

Clearly, the research here is based on a small sample of self-selecting respondents; any conclusions, therefore, must be subject to all the usual limitations of data from what is effectively a pilot project. Nonetheless, the qualitative data suggest several implications worth spelling out. First, those who doubt the potency of Joyce’s novels outside literary academia are patently mistaken. It is clear that Joyce is being read, argued over, and shared communally by nonspecialists, and further, that this engagement is for many a spur to reading and rereading, and to rethinking their own hybrid cultural identities. Second, *Ulysses* in particular is being read and engaged with in a variety of heterodox ways—sometimes literary, but more often both personal and sociocultural. Often, readers invoke Joyce’s work to negotiate versions of the abject Irish man or woman. Interestingly, in this sample Joyce appears to be more important as a tool for thinking about Irish Catholicism than as an engagement with Irishness per se.

Third, though the Melbourne respondents tend to disavow their engagement with the perceived Irishness in Joyce’s fiction, his work actually serves significant identity construction needs for Irish-born migrants who arrived before the 1960s, and even for a later generation of younger migrants—especially in relation to Joyce’s religious and sexual politics. For all, the work of James Joyce elicits a strong sense of cultural ownership. Fourth, for Irish Australians, Joyce—and the Bloomsday observances in particular—represent a way of investigating and giving witness to both their Australian and Irish identities in a culture that offers few similar opportunities. It would be interesting to know whether other diasporic and non-diasporic Bloomsday (or other Joyce-focused) communities would replicate these findings. What the Melbourne narratives of reading Joyce clearly show is that these committed readers use the texts in order to produce and reproduce, transform, and renew cultural identities—and undoubtedly, not just Irish ones.

*Joyce, Bloomsday, and Diasporic Identity: A Report from Melbourne*