



'I AM A DUBLINER. I SPURN THESE LYRICAL TYPES YEARNING FOR THE RURAL'

Like poet Donagh MacDonagh, it is the 'arrogant city'
that 'stirs proudly and secretly in my blood'

By Anne Enright

Whenever I pass along Earlsfort Terrace I remember the fact that I was born on this street, in number 17, which was once the Stella Maris nursing home. As a child, I used to sit on the top deck of the 15A bus on my way home from town and look at the bay window on the first floor. Behind that white curtain, I decided, was the room I first drew breath. I could never see inside.

When I asked my mother what time I was born, she said she could not remember. This felt like indifference to me until I had children of my own and realised a labouring woman might have other things on her mind than the position of the big and little hands on her abandoned wristwatch in the locker by the bed. It was not a difficult labour, she told me, but she seemed a little vague about that too. There was chloroform, I was her fifth. Back at home, her husband was making porridge three times a day for four young children, supplemented by strips of fried bacon, because such was the extent of his culinary expertise. He was a willing and useful father but there were limits. In those days, you couldn't expect a man to know how to cook – he would just be useless at it.

I think my mother would consider it wrong to tell a child how much it hurt to bring them into the world and when I had my own children I understood

that too. No, she said, it was an easy labour. Later, she talked about a nurse, probably a nun, who glanced at her mid-contraction and said, "Now you are paying for your moment's pleasure," but I don't think that happened at my birth. The story from the Stella Maris was about a woman who shared her recovery room, whose husband came in to view the baby and "pulled across the screen", after which there were "noises". It took me many years to understand what was going on in this story. Certainly, in the days I passed on the 15A, I knew very little about such things. I was a student in Trinity, having the time of my life.

On the other side of Earlsfort Terrace was The National University building where the UCD departments of medicine and architecture were housed. Now partly occupied by The National Concert Hall, it was from this neoclassical behemoth that architecture students protested the destruction of the Georgian buildings in the surrounding streets. Years after these students were gone, I walked its abandoned, yellowing halls. One long corridor gave way to the next, fallen plaster squeaked underfoot, doors hung open and light fittings dangled askew. In the distance: the clink of ghostly forceps, the unheard sound of saw through bone. My mother's brother was a pathologist who studied here in the 1940s and, like every medical stu-



dent, he teased his sisters about the body parts of the dead. I remembered this when I walked into a narrow, high-ceilinged dissecting room and saw a steel table bolted to the wall. There was a drain at one end of the table for blood and formaldehyde, another drain below it, set into a corner of the tiled floor.

Behind this building was the secret garden, now returned to its proper name, The Iveagh Gardens. In the 1980s, there was only one entrance to this urban wilderness, through an ordinary doorway in the back wall. The place was always deserted and ghostly in a different way; abundantly overgrown, its dappled paths rustled with a sense of possibility. It was the most romantic place in Dublin town.

This is what I see, even now when I drive down Earlsfort Terrace in my modern electric car. I see my mother labouring across the road from generations of medical students, including my sister in 1980s, when she ate her sandwiches in the secret garden from folded waxed-paper parcels, on the outside of which were the words “Brennan’s Bread”. I see myself as a student, coming home on the last bus. But also, these days, I sense the restored gardens running to the back of MoLi at St Stephens Green, with the tree where James Joyce was once photographed. I see my grandmother at

the same tree, and also my mother, who went to UCD for a term before leaving to take up a job in the Civil Service. I think she missed student life. She talked about a dance in Newman House; how she was walked home to Phibsboro by a poet who did not click with her.

“You were well out of that one,” I told her, when she finally divulged the name. And she said, “Do you think?”

This a street I experience in many dimensions, the map gives way to previous maps as the decades swap and speak to each other. A tree grows and is not chopped down. Some of the stones endure.

And now, for the life of me, I can’t tell you what way the 15A goes. When they change the flow of traffic, when the roads switch from one way to the other damn way and they alter the routes of my childhood buses, it really messes with my head. How am I supposed to get home?

The poet Paul Durcan was also delivered in the Stella Maris, 18 years before I emerged in the same spot. He wrote a poem about the event, telling how his obstetrician, nicknamed “Wee Wee”, was a drunk whose trembling hands botched the birth with a slip of the forceps, leaving the poet with a scarred eye. I asked my mother about Wee Wee but the name meant nothing to her. She never had need of an obstetrician, she said, though they

■ **Anne Enright:** ‘I am a Dubliner born and reared. I spurn these lyrical types with their yearning for the rural.’ **Top: Earlsfort Terrace in Dublin 2, where generations of babies were born in the Stella Maris nursing home.**

Above: the statue of poet Patrick Kavanagh by the Grand Canal.

Photographs: Dara MacDónaill/Artur Widak/NurPhoto via Getty Images

always put their head round the door when the birth was done, “So they could collect the fee.”

All this, and we have not yet turned the corner! We have not lurched, on the growling Bombardier, past the tiny opticians, like a last tooth, alone and un-demolished, where Mendel Stein held out against the office block developers. I have not made it up over the hump of canal bridge and down, past observatory lane into Rathmines. There on the right is my primary school, with its terrazzo steps, parquet corridor that we polished by skating along wearing old socks. I have not put my father in there, smoking in front of a fawning nun, my mother in a hat made of wraparound feathers, dyed a jaunty orange. I have not yet recalled or discussed my First Communion breakfast of pancakes in the school hall, the railings we used to tumble around, behind what is now the public swimming pool.

I could have gone Northside with my mother as she walks home from that dance in Newman House, now MoLi, in 1943. Past the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre where she saw Micheál MacLiammóir and Siobhán McKenna, where I saw Olwen Fouéré and Gabriel Byrne perform. Past the Black Church, which you could hop around on your left foot counterclockwise three times and meet the devil. Past the entrance of Blessington Street where Iris Murdoch was born (I set a novel over that wall) and St Peter’s Church where my granny used to see Walter Macken, a censored writer, at early Mass, on his knees. Although she does not recognise it, a few yards from the church, my mother passes the house where May Joyce died while her son James stood in the room and refused to pray for her soul – though he would steal, for a silly old book, the white china bowl by her deathbed, as recalled by Stephen Dedalus looking over Dublin Bay with his waggish friend, the medical student Buck Mulligan.

Derek Mahon, the late, great poet, knew how the city yielded without warning to every past version on itself. In his poem JP Donleavy’s Dublin he wrote:

For the days are long –
From the first milk van
To the last shout in the night,
An eternity. But the weeks go by
Like birds; and the years, the years
Fly past anti-clockwise
Like clock hands in a bar mirror

“Your first day in Dublin is always the worst,” John Berryman said of his visit in 1966, but I am not sure it ever gets better. I met an American once who said – and I had no reason to disbelieve her – that on her first day in the city, while crossing Trinity’s front square, she met a one-legged nun who’d had an affair with Ezra Pound.

Of course I can’t give my entire heritage, my home town and my family in it, to Irish literature. I am capable of walking down Nassau Street without looking up at the sign for Finns Hotel. I can pass the corner of Merrion Square and ignore the first floor conservatory where Oscar Wilde’s father, another doctor, examined his patient’s eyes in

full natural light.

I can resist! I can get on the bus and go home, past the room where I was born, up over the canal (where I do not consider the work of Patrick Kavanagh). Down past my first school, and the library with its floors of green linoleum. Beyond the intersection, my second school where we learned another poem about Dublin, this time by Donagh MacDonagh which has the rousing opening lines:

“Dublin made me and no little town
With the country closing in on its streets

The cattle walking proudly on its pavements

The jobbers, the gombeenmen and the cheats”

On Rathgar Road, I can forget which window belonged to Siobhán McKenna whose last performance, in Bailegangaire by Tom Murphy, I saw in 1985. When I passed her house as a schoolgirl, you could see gilt wooden chair-backs in the drawingroom window – very delicate and theatrical, as she herself was. I can ignore the road where Tom Murphy was waked 30 years later and a hundred or so yards away. In Terenure, I do not have to acknowledge the house where he lived, when I met him first. I do not even know which gateway on Whitehall Road belonged to the Irish poet, Máirtín Ó Direáin whose work, like Murphy’s and Macken’s, pulled the Irish reader’s heart west.

I am a Dubliner born and reared. I spurn these lyrical types with their yearning for the rural; what MacDonagh called, “The lean road flung over profitless bog/ Where only a snipe could nest.” For me as for him, it is the “arrogant city” that “stirs proudly and secretly in my blood”.

Past the house of the poet, which ever one it was, and the seminary filled, in my childhood, by African priests, is the place I was taught, at six, to reach the string that rang the bell. The day I was brought back from the Stella Maris my siblings waited by this bus stop because how else would I get home? They did not consider the idea my father would drive the distance in his black Volkswagen Beetle. My mother probably sat in the back seat. No safety belt. Me in a wicker basket, or maybe in her arms. This was my first journey; bearing left, turning right, stopping and starting along this same route.

My father drove it slowly, with a crack in the window to let out the smoke from his gag. One last corner. The other children running down the footpath to see the new baby. A neighbour standing by her open door to say all was well. Home.

This piece appears in ULYSSES European Odyssey, a limited-edition book bringing together 18 highly regarded writers, one from each of the cities involved in a pan-European project of the same name. Each writer has responded to contemporary themes relevant to their given Ulysses episode, in the context of their city. Dublin is represented by Anne Enright. To read more please visit: <https://ulysseseurope.eu/>