Joyce’s Life and Letters - a Painful Case?

John McCourt

More than fifty years after the publication of Richard Ellmann’s *James Joyce* (1959), one of the great literary biographies of the twentieth century but now somewhat outdated, the time seems ripe for a major new biography. Although Joyce studies are still in a distinctly transitional phase, we do undoubtedly now have available vastly greater knowledge about the life and the works than was the case when Ellmann was assembling his extraordinary work. As Finn Fordham put it:

*The subject of Joyce’s personality is today in disarray. Which was he: an egotist, a narcissist, unpredictable, prudish, old-fashioned, bourgeois, generous, mean-spirited, a drunk, a liar and a self-deceiver, moralistically and hypocritically down on hypocritical moralists, superstitious, manipulative, placid, humorous, good company, inconsistent, morose, misanthropic, a snob, a humanist, short-tempered, languid? A man of small virtue, as he described himself, or a heroic being, as Beckett described him? Joyce dangles these qualities before us in the figure of Shem in Finnegans Wake, and they feature in different ways in Ellmann, where as a person he appears in the round as a forgivably proud or painfully tragic humanist hero, a Don Quixote or a King Lear (both self-deceivers), who nevertheless manages - mysteriously - to give to the world a twentieth century Don Quixote and a Falstaff. But Ellmann’s picture of a developing personality is fifty years old.*
Today, among other things, we possess a greatly enlarged accumulation of letters, notes, manuscripts, and drafts, many new critical perspectives, several partial biographies that look at specific periods in Joyce’s life, such as the Dublin and the Trieste years, and various vital personalities that were intimately part of his family or his circle. We also have a far broader appreciation of the many contexts which formed the writer, a deepened sense of the later Joyce and of his methods of composing *Finnegans Wake*, and a substantial body of theoretical work, to underlie the construction of literary biography.

There is an obvious need for these new elements to be translated into Joyce biographies that would appeal both to specialists and to the more general reader. For that reason, I looked forward to the publication of a new life of Joyce by the distinguished English biographer, Gordon Bowker. Unfortunately, his *James Joyce: A Biography* is a disappointment and falls a long way short of challenging Ellmann in the way, for instance, that Roy Foster’s two-volume Yeats biography recast its subject for a new generation. Quite the contrary. His mishmash of materials actually sets back the collective attempt to recast Joyce’s life against Ellmann’s monumental version.

What immediately emerges from reading Gordon Bowker’s *James Joyce* is that he has little empathy with his subject. There was much in Joyce not to like and Bowker describes it all with clarity and conviction. Thus we amply get Joyce the diner-out, the drinker, the scrounger, the lecher, the singer, the poser, the bully, but what remains largely unexpressed is a sense of Joyce the writer and of the complicated nature of his undoubted literary greatness. Describing *Ulysses* on the first page of his preface, Bowker notes how ‘the slow but certain impact of that book on the wider consciousness is mirrored in the gradual but inexorable progress
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towards permissiveness in the West’. I would not have thought a journey towards permissiveness was necessarily progress, neither would I have thought Joyce’s achievement was ‘to lend an aspect of beauty and humour to what many regard as repugnant’ (p.5). This may be part of the achievement but it hardly serves as an adequate representation of what Joyce set out to achieve.

Bowker’s work does introduce some useful corrections to the Ellmann picture, including an appreciation of the role played by the Trieste years in the growth of the young writer’s artistic consciousness and a more nuanced understanding of Joyce’s relationship with the various significant women in his life (much of this, thanks to the work of Brenda Maddox and Carol Shloss). An example is the disturbing but under-explored reevaluation of Joyce’s relationship with Harriet Shaw Weaver: ‘To Joyce, Harriet was now (and secretly perhaps always had been) a figure of fun from whom to extract money by laying it on as thickly as possible’ (p.497). Apart from describing Miss Shaw Weaver condescendingly with the over-familiar, ‘Harriet’, something Joyce never did, this rather startling comment needed to be better explained by Bowker, who introduces it only belatedly at the end of his volume.

Much of what might seem new to the general reader (if not to the Joyce scholar) is undermined by the biography’s uncertain narrative voice. This is in stark contrast with Ellmann’s work, which gathered much of its considerable persuasive power, as Katherine Frank has shown, precisely from its highly authoritative ‘voice’. Bowker has clearly spent time in the archives but has not been able to make the most of his finds there. Better or simply more footnoting would have made the work more useful and would have been fairer to the authors of the many volumes from whom he borrows. It is frustrating, for example, to
read with regard to Herbert Gorman’s annoyance at Joyce’s editing of his biography, ‘Gorman, it is reported, never forgave Joyce’ (p.512). A visit to the footnotes gives no clue as to where this was reported. There is a similar lack of clarity over the use of archives. It is difficult to ascertain how well Bowker was acquainted with the materials in some of the major archives and this is certainly not helped by the scanty use of citation. From the acknowledgments, it seems he went to all the major collections, but there are no direct references to the holdings at the National Library of Ireland (he appears to be aware only of the Joyce-Léon papers held there and not of the more recently acquired materials). He only quotes Catherine Fahy’s published summary-catalogue of the Joyce-Léon material, citing it as ‘NLI Book’, which means nothing. None of the quotations from Fahy’s useful catalogue are an adequate substitute for the language and details in the original correspondence, the largest unpublished collection anywhere. Nor is there a single citation from the world’s largest and most important James Joyce collection at the University of Buffalo; it is not even listed as a ‘Library and Archive Source’. One is left with the impression that Bowker was a man in a hurry, relying on a lot of second-hand information. As a result he frequently trips over himself.

Despite some good moments, the volume fails to add up to a substantial revisiting of Joyce’s life and is marred by its often dull language and a lack of feeling for Joyce’s Ireland, which he describes repeatedly and irritatingly as ‘British Ireland’. Often his comments are harmless but otiose. An example is his pedestrian summary of ‘The Dead’: ‘Undoubtedly the best story of the Dubliners collection is “The Dead”, which tells of Gabriel Conroy’s painful discovery that his wife, Gretta, has had a secret, unforgettable lover – a consumptive boy, Michael Furey, who died shortly after lingering at her gate one freezing night to confess
his love’ (p.171). Even if this has been included for the benefit of the general reader rather than the expert, it is hard to imagine such a reader ploughing through Bowker in the first place, had he or she not already been familiar with Joyce’s famous short story. Equally redundant are sentences such as: ‘For the British Empire, as 1882 dawned, it was business as usual’ (p.22), or: ‘Not only did he demonstrate his command of a wide range of styles of writing, from Chaucer to modern slang, but he was able to create his own style, a style which has been immensely influential, emulated but never matched’ (p.59). No great harm done, but little valued added.

Other affirmations border on the improbable: ‘John’s habit of regular long walks around Dublin and environs, caught by his children, foreshadows the wandering narrative line which snakes through most of his son’s fiction’ (p.13). Too many of Bowker’s asides are fanciful and off the mark, such as his comment on Gerald Griffin’s description of Joyce, ‘in shabby grey suit, quondam white canvas shoes down at heel and a tennis-shirt open at the neck’ in conversation with Skeffington, Colum, and Kettle in the National Library. In Bowker’s words, ‘Joyce’s once-fastidious Jekyll was being overtaken by his slovenly, coarse, inebriate Hyde’ (p.119). Equally off-beam is his choice of language in describing Nora’s consent to go out with Joyce. It seems drawn more from late nineteenth century romantic popular fiction than from contemporary biography and fails to capture Nora in any concrete way:

She tossed her head and laughed - the deep knowing laugh of an enchantress - and, in a voice which sang, of the Irish West, quickly agreed, then skipped off along the pavement, smiling at the thought of her unexpected conquest and the prospect of adventure (p.2).
Unfortunately many of Bowker’s summarizing descriptions lack subtlety or are wide of the mark. Thus, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ‘is both an extended confession and a droll commentary’ (p.6). Droll? Many of the scenes in *A Portrait* contain Joyce’s greatest drama and ‘droll’ (amusing, farcical) is surely the wrong adjective. In *Ulysses*, we are told, the reader encounters ‘a multifarious cast of Joyce’s acquaintances in a literary free-for-all’ (p.6). This comment draws attention to the simplistic connections Bowker draws, with disappointing inevitability, between Joyce’s life and his works, falling into an all-too familiar and all-too-often already vilified habit of reading the fictional works as reliable sources of information for the life. Bowker should have learned from decades of criticism which taxed Ellmann with doing just this. Denis Donoghue and Hugh Kenner were among many who took issue with the great biographer for tracing the complex materials of the fiction almost inevitably back to the life. They also criticised him for doing exactly the opposite, borrowing, to quote Kenner, ‘freely from the fictions when details are needed, secure in his confidence that if they got into Joyce’s fictions they were originally facts’. Bowker does the same, only more artlessly.

Thus we read that ‘we can glimpse Joyce from revealing moments (epiphanies) in his fiction’ (Gabriel Conroy’s sexual insecurity was, we are told, Joyce’s own) although the author also acknowledges that ‘autobiographical fiction must always be suspect biography’ (p.9). If this is so, why does he describe Joyce rather than Stephen as ‘the self-proclaimed forger of the conscience of his race’ (p.301) and take the opening of *A Portrait* as a source for young Joyce’s start in life: ‘Little Jim (if the imaginative memory of his alter ego Stephen can be trusted) was “a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo”, his father, “a hairy face” looking at him, as he later recalled “through a glass”’ (p.20). As every schoolboy knows by
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now, Stephen cannot be trusted. Another example of the fiction/non-fiction fusion is to be found when he describes Gogarty’s kidnap during the Civil War: ‘Senator Oliver Gogarty was kidnapped by Irregulars while taking a bath, escorted to a deserted house on the banks of the Liffey and seemed about to be shot. But the wily Buck Mulligan feigned a bowel seizure and, when his simple captors took him outside to relieve himself, he threw his greatcoat over their heads, leapt into the Liffey, […]’ (p.317). Thus Gogarty becomes one with his alter ego in Ulysses and is trivialised, along with his armed IRA kidnappers, through the biographer’s ill-chosen tone.

Bowker’s stated aim at the outset should put most readers on alert:

*This biography will attempt to go beyond the mere facts and tap into Joyce’s elusive consciousness. Furthermore the work is informed by the belief that it is highly enlightening to view the work of a highly autobiographical writer like Joyce in the context of his life* (p.8).

The problem here is not just the stylistic sloppiness of the second sentence. Of course we can view Joyce’s work in the context of his life but, before getting into interpretation and speculation, before attempting to ‘tap into Joyce’s elusive consciousness’, Bowker would have done well to check that he got his facts right. Contrary to what he affirms, the “Cyclops” episode of Ulysses is not set in Davy Byrne’s but in Barney Kiernan’s, Cardinal Newman did not found University College Dublin (although he did, of course, serve as the first rector of its antecedent, the Catholic University of Ireland, which, at the request of Cardinal Cullen, he played an important role in establishing), nor was what we today call Newman House on the north side of St Stephen’s Green. Daniel O’Connell was not one of UCD’s first students although UCD would undoubtedly be only too
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glad to have been able to name him among its alumni had he not passed away long before it was established. His grandson, bearer of the same name, was, in fact, the first student entered on the register of the newly formed Catholic University in 1854. Had he consulted his Google translator, Bowker would have found out that the satirical Triestine publication, *La Coda del Diavolo*, should be not translated as the vulgar ‘the devil’s arse’ but as ‘the devil’s tail’ (p.303).

None of these lapses can be excused by Bowker’s disclaimer at the close of his preface: ‘Salvaging all the scattered pieces and reassembling them can only produce an approximation of the original, and the drama of ghostly existences will depend on efforts of imagination as much as accumulation of fact’ (p.10). Here he is in danger of sounding almost like Ellmann, who justified the methods which led to a wonderful read but also to a mountain of errors being, for generations, accepted as facts, in the following terms: ‘The unknown need not be the unknowable. To paraphrase Freud, where obscurity was, hypothesis shall be. In this sense, paucity of information may even be an advantage, as freeing the mind for conjecture’.  Ellmann, however, was working in a pre-computer age, with nothing like the mass of material and resources on which his successor could draw.

All that said, within its limits Gordon Bowker’s book offers a reasonably competent version of Joyce’s life, which will attract a large readership. But the scholarly challenges to which Bowker, as a non-Joycean, understandably did not respond, remain more glaring than ever today. What we continue to need, ever more urgently are new volumes of Joyce’s published and as yet unpublished correspondence and a long, chronological version of the life, that sets out the facts clearly and correctly and is placed within a carefully conceived theoretical

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framework. It is not important which of these comes first. Both represent huge challenges which I fear will not be met in the short term. As things stand, a new biography would probably have to be cast in several volumes and be a collective project with individual scholars covering precise periods and aspects of Joyce’s life. The letters project is, to my mind, the more urgent one, although Yeats studies have shown that a total rewriting of the biography was possible before publication of the correspondence had been completed.

The Joyce letters published over the years, mainly in the volumes edited by Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann, amount to fewer than half the total correspondence now known to exist. Many of the transcriptions are less than exact, have been subjected to silent editing, or are available only in English translation and without the original Italian or French versions. They are also inadequately annotated. What is needed now is for these letters to be republished in integrated volumes, along with the roughly 1800 others which have never been in print. Rumours about a variety of not entirely convincing projects to publish the collected letters have recently circulated. A team was initially put together by Lucia Joyce’s biographer Carol Loeb Shloss, but this appears to have been disbanded. As I write, a new team to be led by the distinguished trio of Kevin Dettmar, Chair of English at Pomona College, William Brockman, Paterno Family Librarian for Literature at Pennsylvania State University, and Robert Spoo, a chair in Law at the University of Tulsa, has announced that it will be attempting to do a full collection. Brockmann, among other things, is the compiler of the very useful *The James Joyce Checklist: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials*. Spoo, a former editor of the *James Joyce Quarterly*, and publisher of some eighty Pound Letters along with Omar Pound, is also a lawyer, with what presumably will be a vital competence in the area of copyright. Dettmar is an acclaimed literary critic.
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who has done substantial work on Joyce and modernism, although, of late, he has seemed more interested in ‘rock’n’roll’ studies.¹¹

It has to be said, however, that all three already have busy lives as professional academics and it is difficult to see how they will find the time to engage in this mammoth project, involving above all else, as it does, the laborious and time-consuming task of deciphering Joyce’s often terrible handwriting. With the possible exception of Brockmann, none currently seems particularly interested in the grind that this type of archival scholarship will necessitate. Given that the most important recent scholarly work on _Finnegans Wake_ and on the last twenty years of Joyce’s life – the period that is most sparingly and unconvincingly treated in Ellmann and subsequent biographical works and that is most sparsely represented in the published letters – has been carried out in Europe, it is to be hoped that these three American scholars, will eventually come to share ownership of this project with a broad, multi-lingual international team of textual scholars that includes those who have been actively working on Joyce’s manuscripts in recent decades both in their own right and as supervisors of graduate theses in this area. If the core group remains too small, it will condemn the project to taking decades rather than years to come to completion, rather like what happened in the case of the ongoing work on the Yeats letters. The brilliantly edited and annotated first volume of the poet’s collected letters appeared back in 1986. Three other volumes of this monumental scholarly work have appeared in the meantime but the Yeats project has still only reached 1907.¹² In order words, forty years of Yeats’ correspondence has taken this highly qualified editorial team some thirty years to complete.

The difficulties involved in deciphering Joyce’s handwriting make his correspondence a forbidding challenge and one only a limited number of scholars is qualified to undertake. As many of the letters are not in English or not wholly
in English, it is imperative that the team be multi-lingual. It would also be preferable, given that correspondence is a two way process, that at least the more significant replies to Joyce’s missives be published. Joyce’s long correspondence with Harriet Shaw Weaver, for example, would only make sense if her side of the conversation is given equal space. Equally, given that, in the latter years of his life, the author delegated his letter-writing to others, such as Paul Léon, it will be necessary to include many letters dictated by Joyce or written on his behalf, as well as to the replies to these letters. Readers are encouraged not to hold their breaths. This project will take a long time to reach completion.

In the meantime, this and other such undertakings have been hampered by a lack of clarity with regard to copyright on the unpublished Joyce material. The copyright status appears to vary from continent to continent and country to country, which makes scholars cautious about proposing editions and publishers cagey, or merely lazy, about commissions. Something of a literary grenade was recently thrown into the midst of this ongoing confusion when Anastasia (Stacey) Herbert, an American researcher and curator who has been working in Ireland for many years, brought out a previously unpublished Joyce letter, dated 5 September 1936, containing a very slight Joycean whimsy, written in 1936 for his grandson, Stephen Joyce. In its published form, this short letter is grandly entitled Cats of Copenhagen and flagged as ‘James Joyce’s story for children’. The letter in question is part of the 2006 Hans E. Jahnke Bequest to the Zürich James Joyce Foundation. Professor Jahnke was the son of Giorgio Joyce’s second wife, Dr. Asta Osterwalder Joyce. His generous bequest includes an important horde of personal letters, autographs, and typescripts, as well as medical reports, legal documents, royalty statements, along with a copy of Joyce’s 1931 will and of his marriage certificate, in addition to various important memorabilia and photographs. The Zürich
Foundation, run by Fritz Senn, a hugely esteemed Joyce scholar and someone held in great affection by readers and fellow-scholars throughout the world, has a much-lauded policy of openness and trust and has allowed bona fide scholars access to this precious and heretofore unseen material. Whatever about the question of copyright, the publishing of this letter of 5 September, one of the prize letters in the collection, clearly seems to be in breach of the open intellectual spirit of the Foundation, whose staff are currently cataloguing the entire collection with a view to eventual publication, once the copyright situation has been defined and the unpublished material is ascertained to be in the public domain.

Herbert has stoutly defended her actions by stating that the ‘unpublished works of James Joyce are now (since 1 January 2012) in the public domain’ and that the publication of *The Cats of Copenhagen* ‘is legal and valid’. Ithys Press evidently sees this tiny illustrated book as a step forward for intellectual freedom and claims that it ‘was conceived not as a commercial venture but as a carefully crafted tribute to a rather different Joyce, the family man and grandfather who was a fine storyteller, much like his own father John Stanislaus’. This non-commercial pitch would be more convincing if the volume were not priced at €1200 for the letterpress edition (26 copies), and €300 for the remaining 700 copies. Since initial publication, Ithys Press appears to have sold on the rights – having now presumably established their own copyright on material they claim was out of copyright – to the large, commercial Italian publisher, Giunti, which intends to bring out an edition in October. In Italy it has been reported that Herbert ‘went to a literary agent who, in just a few days, and in time for the children’s book fair in Bologna, closed a deal with Giunti for publication in Italian and is involved in ongoing negotiations with other prestigious publishers around the world with a view to a simultaneous world-wide publication in October 2012’.
In itself, all this might seem to the casual reader to be much ado about nothing. But, apart from the other possible implications, there are consequences with regard to the larger project of publishing all of Joyce’s unpublished correspondence, which now risks being placed in jeopardy. Closer to home, the National Library of Ireland needs to be on the alert. Since 2000, the Irish State has spent some €15 million in acquiring published and unpublished Joyce manuscripts, correspondence, and related material, which, in just a decade, has made the NLI the world’s single largest repository of unpublished Joycean. Some of this material, which includes an early James Joyce commonplace book, notes and drafts for *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as many letters, was used as part of the successful exhibition entitled *James Joyce and Ulysses at the National Library of Ireland*, which ran from 2004 to 2006. It is a shame that at least some of this wonderful material cannot be part of a permanent exhibition, which would surely be a more valuable and lasting tourist attraction than the many Joyce celebrations in the city, often created, as it seems, at the drop of a hat. Instead most of it s languishes out of sight of not only the interested visitor but also of most Joyce scholars.

More worrying still, the NLI and indeed the Irish Government seem to be procrastinating instead of taking decisive action to guarantee ownership of the copyright. Large state expenditure risks being compromised. It should be an urgent priority of Jimmy Deenihan T.D., Minister for Arts and Culture, Fiona Ross, director of the National Library, and indeed of the entire NLI Board (which, incidentally, includes Robert Spoo) to assert copyright and to plan the best possible use of this material. It should form a deeply significant part of new publications (both digital and in print) to appear in the coming years and help flesh out and indeed revise our ever-growing knowledge of Joyce. As with the letters project, this too, may happen later rather than sooner.
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Which would be a shame. The reality is that there is a mass of Joyce material now awaiting publication and our knowledge of the writer is currently deeply compromised because it languishes, mostly unseen, in archives. For years the Joyce Estate seemed the principal stumbling block. Now the way appears to have been cleared. Having recently read through the unpublished family letters that are held at the Zürich Foundation, it is increasingly clear to me that their publication would greatly enrich our vision of Joyce in the thirties. They are, in a very real sense, Joyce’s life in his own words, very often written not so much with an eye to posterity as with far more pressing concerns, like getting bills paid, or medical care, or wheedling money out of his ever-supportive sponsors. Yes, yet again we see Joyce fussing over money, his writing, and various publication issues; we see the caring, fretting, fussing father of Lucia with whom we were already familiar, but what also emerges radiantly is the joking, caring, loving father of Giorgio. Some of these letters, which skip from English to French to Italian, and are signed ‘Babbo’, reveal an unexpectedly light touch, a rare vision of Joyce off-guard, always the protective father. Yes, as Gordon Bowker shows us so well, there was much not to like in Joyce, but a careful trawling of his unpublished correspondence can also attest that there is still much to appreciate, not just in his great fiction but in the life and letters of the man himself.

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Notes

1 Richard Ellmann, James Joyce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). This volume was revised in 1982.
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Announcement made at an event at the University of Tulsa on 3 April 2012 and entitled ‘Letters of the Law: Publishing the Unpublished Letters of James Joyce in a Post-Copyright Age’.


His most recent publications are *Think Rock* (Prentice-Hall, 2011), *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), and *Is Rock Dead?* (Routledge, 2006).


In fact, we still do not even know where the majority of Weaver’s letters to Joyce are held. The largest extant collection is in the NLI.


*Brescia Oggi*, 20 March 2012: ‘La Herbert, spiega ora la Giunti in una nota, si «è rivolta così a un agente letterario che, nel giro di pochi giorni, e in tempo per la Fiera del libro per ragazzi di Bologna, ha concluso un accordo con Giunti in Italia e con altre case editrici di prestigio, con trattative in corso in tutto il mondo per una pubblicazione in contemporanea mondiale a ottobre 2012».[http://www.bresciaoggi.it/stories/Cultura_e_Spettacoli/344519_joyce_per_ragazzi_riscoperta_una_favola_inedita/](http://www.bresciaoggi.it/stories/Cultura_e_Spettacoli/344519_joyce_per_ragazzi_riscoperta_una_favola_inedita/)