

## Bloomsday in Melbourne 1994

More than 400 people attended the most comprehensive Bloomsday proceedings ever in Melbourne on 16 June 1994, sponsored by the W. B. Yeats Society. Bloomsday had been celebrated in Melbourne for the preceding seven years with continuous readings of Joyce's *Ulysses* at Collected Works book shop and with sanitized readings at Molly Bloom's pub in Port Melbourne. In 1994, on the 90th anniversary of the day on which the novel is set, the W.B. Yeats Society of Victoria inaugurated an expanded peripatetic program. Bloomsday 1994 featured two Leopold Blooms, actors Jim Howard and Simon McGuinness, Elizabeth Kemp as Molly, Josephine Fisher as Gertie MacDowell, Jai Cornes – a second year Literature and Drama student at Rusden – as Blazes Boylan and Buck Mulligan, Paul Davis as narrator, and Gillian Hardy as Bella Cohen, the Madame of Monto. The troupe moved around central Melbourne city streets performing in role. Readings, dramatizations, lectures and sessions of Joycean song and music occurred at eleven locations across the city and reached a climax – in reputable and disreputable senses – where it ought, at Molly Bloom's Pub in South Melbourne.

Many Deakin University staff and students took part, and there were numerous patrons who had come in response to publicity, including book club contingents, Joyce aficionados and those who piously intended to read the novel.

The day started at the State Library with the prescribed breakfast of pork kidneys, or croissants and coffee for those who could not stomach 'the fine tang of faintly scented urine'. The Guinness company donated generous quantities of the black stuff. The readings from each episode were framed for the audience by mini-lectures explaining place, events and, sometimes, significance, and each reading was dramatized. One of the Leopold Blooms, Jim Howard, caused a mild stir while reading the episode from Calypso which is located in Bloom's outdoor toilet: he dropped his trousers to reveal Victorian under-drawers. The promenade in costume down Swanston Walk to Collected Works book shop turned heads, and on future occasions (which we are now committed to) we hope to include even more elaborate street theatre of this kind.

The Collected Works bookshop off Flinders Lane is a little reminiscent of the book shops in Nassau Street in Dublin – none of the book barrows but plenty of titles both old and new. Collected Works always honours Joyce with a book display. The management presses customers in any corner to read, eat soda bread and pate, and partake of a discreet quantity of something fortified. Readings occur non-stop from opening until 5pm on Bloomsday.

The highlight of the day, courtesy partly of the weather which was bright enough to peel the eyeballs, was the event at the cemetery. John Allison Monkhouse's horse-drawn funeral rig left from the gates of Newman College to proceed to the cemetery. The generosity of the firm was astonishing:

Maybelle and Napoleon – magnificent drayhorses with their plumage of black feathers – were part of an extravagant ensemble fitted out meticulously for the occasion. The hearse was an 1820s number, richly carved and enamelled in black paint, complete with coffin (unoccupied, we had to assume) and flowers. The driver and two grooms wore grey mourning suits and toppers, pressed and pristine, with an appropriate mournful demeanour to match. An illegal progress (an act not to be repeated, because the Reverend Conmee, rigged in soutane and biretta, may, in subsequent years, not be able to appease the motor-bike mounted Russell Street watch) from Newman College to the cemetery arrived at the chapel in the Catholic section where the density of Celtic crosses per square metre of cemetery and of Irish names engraved on them would have to be competitive with the O'Connell circle at Glasnevin Cemetery.

The A.R.T. (artroundtown) Gallery in Collins Place was intended to be the setting for a Joyce-inspired exhibition of paintings, but, unfortunately, time lines did not permit the artist to complete the project. In 1995, it is hoped that a competition for younger artists will be mounted. Artists will be invited to submit works on a Joycean theme or in a Joycean mode. This year, however, the space at the gallery was used for a miscellany of readings, some rehearsed and some impromptu. The gallery proprietor, Ms Eva Eden, mounted a display which had some fortuitous Joycean connections.

En route to the City Square, the window display on Joyce at Kay Craddock's antiquarian books invited entry, and the group was requested to return to her establishment in 1995. A discomfited and very nervous doorwoman witnessed a brief reading intended to translate Georges department store into Brown Thomas of Grafton Street, Dublin (Georges had been approached for permission, but the watch had not been informed). Given Joyce's meticulous attention to women's clothes (their luxurious or homely textures and colours, the cost of them, and how women make the most of them by sleight of hand), fortuitously, it was sale day at Georges of Collins Street, one of the premier exclusive emporia in Melbourne.

The City Square was the hardest venue for the actors to work. This was a pity since the material from the Nausicaa incident, featuring Bloom's lustful eyeful of the sensual Gertie McDowell, played by Josephine Fisher, is pure entertainment with the usual Joycean seriousness about social formations. I'm sure Joyce would have approved of the wonderful mix of high and low culture, as Joyce's words mingled with tram, skateboard and traffic sounds, and the amplified voice of the spruiker at Bookworld. Our other Bloom, Simon McGuinness, with the resourcefulness of the thespian determined to be noticed despite having no lines, forced his audience to acknowledge his presence (no mean feat as he was behind them) and his lechery by agitating the greenery. All this to the strains of that most formal of Latin hymns, the 'Tantum Ergo', and some fireworks sound effects.

Joyce's deliberate clashing of styles was replicated at many venues. Musical styles were heterogeneous in the Chloe room at Young and Jackson's, where Galway working songs jostled with Caribbean-inspired jazz rhythms and Victorian parlour songs like 'Love's Old Sweet Song'. The musical segment, based on the events in the Sirens chapter, also had a Joycean flavour, with a reggae pianist who was competing with the Yeats Society members for use of the piano solemnly informing the organizers that he was no mere accompanist but an 'artiste'. Shades of Joyce's 'A Mother' and 'The Boarding House' (Dubliners)!

Two functions at Mietta's – a lunch with readings from *Lestrygonians* (with a barman playing a barman), and an afternoon tea symposium, 'Demystifying Joyce', given by Ted Reilly and Frances Devlin-Glass on the daunting opening chapters of the novel – were booked out. The lecture was designed to make accessible the very difficult *Telemachiad*, or first three chapters of the novel, which relies on familiarity with the prior novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with Irish history and with the history of literature. The lecture, designed to demystify, will become an annual event, with different aspects of the novel being explored year by year, and pitched at a serious general readership. The organizers and participants report that the most satisfying reward for the day's exploits was the often-heard comment from patrons that the readings and dramatizations inspired them to read or re-read *Ulysses*.

The climactic function at Molly Bloom's bistro in the evening attracted a crowd of 140 people – an astonishing number given the available space. Aine Szymanski, long associated with theatrical presentations of Irish material in Melbourne and a key figure in earlier Bloomsdays, read a comic elegiac poem of her own composing in which she mockingly farewelled sanitized readings of the novel. This was a splendid teaser for what followed. Actor Gillian Hardy excelled as Bella/Bello, and the gender-bending scene from *Circe* which she enacted with Simon McGuinness was one of the theatrical highlights of the day. Performing while patrons ate and waiters waited and barmen served would have challenged most actors, but these actors stood fast and delivered some hair-raising and wicked material. Some Yeats Society members and non-members dressed as bawds found seats on the bar, where they were frequently taken for the real thing by the real patrons of the hotel. The Bloomsdress competition was won by Andi Connell, who masqueraded as Floey, a lady of the night. Resplendent in emerald silk, she offered to 'administer correction' with either a riding crop or a horse-whip of dyed red horsehair. Her prize was unmentionable.

Planning for Bloomsday 1995 is well under way. We want to re-run parts of the 1994 script and to introduce some new episodes and venues. We would like to encourage more in the way of Bloomsdress, and not just for the actors. The W.B. Yeats Society hopes that in 1994 a tradition has been inaugurated, when annually many readers will approach the literary monument of *Ulysses*

in the spirit in which Joyce wrote it – with a mixture of reverence and relish, but mostly with a sense of its sacrilegious laughter at every institution that seeks to command respect, not excluding literary ones.