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Brussels Bloomsday Brunch, organised by Femmes d'Europe and hosted by Ambassador Helena Nolan, in aid of projects funded by Femmes d'Europe 'Helping those in need'

President of the Association, Commissioner Hogan, Dear Friends,

First of all, can I wish you, in advance, a Happy Bloomsday! I am delighted to welcome you all here to the Irish Embassy, for what is, I think, our first ever Bloomsday Brunch event. Thank you all for coming and for demonstrating your interest in James Joyce and Irish literature and also your support for the wonderful Femmes d'Europe charity, which does such inspiring work. All of the funds raised here today will go to niche projects to help and empower girls and women. The embassy team is delighted to support this event, and the Association, in its important work and I want to commend the Irish group for their initiative and for all their efforts, here today and generally. I hope that you will all continue to support them and their events and the embassy is looking forward to our continued collaboration.

Bloomsday is a wonderful celebration which takes place this week, not just in Dublin, but all around the world. On Monday, I had the pleasure of hosting a Reception to mark the opening of an important Symposium on "The Art of James Joyce", at the beautiful University of Antwerp, where over 250 scholars from Ireland, Belgium and the world are gathered all this week. Belgium is a very special location for

Bloomsday events because we know that James Joyce, accompanied by his family, spent around two and a half weeks holidaying here in September 1926. We know that he stayed here in Brussels as well as in Antwerp and Ghent and that he visited Ostend and Bruges. We also know that he took the bus out from Brussels to visit the battlefield of Waterloo, where he apparently asked lots of questions, of his guide and the bus driver. Joyce was working on *Finnegans Wake* while he was here and there are many references in it to Waterloo, which appears in different guises, as well as other connections with Waterloo and its environs within the text. Joyce was in Antwerp in mid-September and in one of his notebooks he called it 'Gnantwerp' after being devoured by mosquitoes. He had been working on his Flemish in advance of his visit and claimed to have finished a 64-lesson course while here in Brussels, which is very impressive indeed! There are said to be some traces of the Flemish language in *Finnegans Wake* - which perhaps makes it more accessible for Belgians? In this job, I learn something new every day and I recently learned that an American editor, though she was a fan of the short stories in "Dubliners", had rejected for publication in what was presumably an episode of *Finnegans Wake*, sent to her by Joyce while he was holidaying here in Belgium - on the grounds not just of obscenity but dullness, sharp criticism indeed!

I don't want to keep you from your brunch or from the dramatic and musical treats ahead courtesy of Paidi and the Irish Theatre Group, so I am going to limit myself to sharing just a few personal reflections about Joyce's work. I should begin by expressing my gratitude, as an Irish diplomat, to James Joyce for becoming, inadvertently and unintentionally, a quite remarkable Ambassador for his city and his country, despite, or perhaps precisely because, he lived so much of his life away from both. Many of us spend much of our lives away from home, choosing to work, study and live abroad, here in Belgium and elsewhere. We have a book club in the embassy now and, no matter what book we choose to discuss, we always seem to come back to talking about issues around identity and the idea of home, perhaps because so many of us are away from home, perhaps because all great books are about those essential questions - who am I? And where do I belong? We talk about how, sometimes, we love a place so much that we have to leave it. Sometimes we learn more about it and learn to love it even more when we are somewhere else. And sometimes, being away from the place we know and love the best, drives a need within us to find ways to recreate it, to re-experience it, to reimagine it. We all create our own narratives of home. A great writer like Joyce can describe home in such a way that others who have never been there and who may know nothing else about it can imagine it for themselves, may even fall in love with it themselves. Because, we visit many places for the first, and often the only time, through the pages

of a book. But while we, in the business of promoting Ireland, will be forever grateful to Joyce for creating work that draws countless visitors to his city - his muse - we know, of course, that his objective was not to write the ultimate travel brochure. So, Dublin is here in his work, with its warts and all. And Joyce confronts us with that beautiful complexity, all that is damaged and flawed, as well as all that is pure, in our beloved, imperfect, capital city and in the busy minds and the beating hearts of its citizens.

While it is Joyce's great adventure with the English language which has perhaps propelled him and keeps him to the forefront of literary analysis and acclaim, I believe that the reason his work has endured and continues to be not just read but, in the case of *Ulysses*, re-enacted by our citizens and by many others, every year on Bloomsday, in Dublin and all around the world, is to do with the quality of memory. In *Ulysses*, and also in *Dubliners*, which always seems to me its closest partner, (and we will enjoy shortly an excerpt from the short story *Clay* performed by the Irish Theatre Group) we experience the memory of time, of people, of mood, of place, of streets and sounds and smells, of appetite and taste. Indeed, we have some of those delicious aromas and tastes here today! This is tangible memory. Joyce doesn't stop time, it is not frozen or sterile, but somehow he holds time in suspension so we can experience it again and again. And we all read and re-read Joyce differently at different ages, and each time we find

and respond to something new. With Joyce, we seem to be in a world of tenuous ambiguity and this is also good because this is indeed, Dublin, this is Ireland, and this is the world too. We are living through ambiguous times. Like Shakespeare, Joyce's work can be interpreted anywhere and anytime and has a global reach, from the US to Japan and beyond and it is wonderful to celebrate here in Belgium also, a place which Joyce himself experienced and brought in to his work.

It is entirely possible, of course, that Joyce himself would have loathed Bloomsday and all that goes with it but I rather like to think that actually he might have really enjoyed it, seeing us all have some fun with his great works and seeing citizens getting involved in literature and in the life of a great city. Ulysses is set in Dublin but, in a way, it honours life in all cities and it honours the interior lives and loves of all of us. Just this week, our Taoiseach and Tánaiste launched an important new initiative called "Global Ireland", setting out an ambitious plan to enhance and maximise Ireland's international engagement. Cultural diplomacy will be an important element in this because culture helps us to know and to better understand each other. It is a real pleasure for me, and for my team at the embassy, to host this event and to help raise much needed funds in support of the Femmes d'Europe, a charity which focuses on niche projects to support and empower women and girls, something I think that Joyce, with his emphasis on the female voice, would I think been proud to be

associated with. Let's not forget that there are two Blooms in Ulysses, there is Leopold but there is also Molly Bloom, who inspires us to always say "Yes!"

Thank you to everyone, I hope that you will enjoy the Brunch and I wish you a Happy Brussels Bloomsday!