



Bloomsday Montreal Festival goes virtual

Description

The 9th edition takes place despite COVID-19

By **Byron Toben**

Back in 2011, retired Chemistry teacher **David Schurman** and his wife **Judith** came up with the idea of forming an annual **Bloomsday Festival** in Montreal. It has now joined dozens of cities around the world to hold such events on or around **June 16**, the day on which **Leopold Bloom**, the central figure in James Joyce's groundbreaking book, ***Ulysses*** took his long walk around Dublin in 1904.



David and Judith Schurman – Image: courtesy of
Bloomsday Montreal

It has always amused me that the most famous Irish person (save St. Patrick) was a fictional person who was not



wholly Irish (his father being a Hungarian Jewish immigrant).

This combination shook the literary world, reminding me of G. Bernard Shaw's quip that, "A world bereft of both its Irish and its Jews would become a tame dull place indeed".

Over the years, the Montreal event seems to have been more ambitious than many of its counterparts elsewhere, in blending film, dramatic readings, lectures, walks and pub events over 5 days.

While the current COVID-19 situation has limited its in-person activities, it has kept things going with a well-done Internet presence.

June 12

The Festival opened on June 12 with **Welcoming announcements** presented by actress **Kathleen Fee**.

These included a clip ***From Dublin With Love*** from the Dublin Public Library expressing well wishes to Montreal as it hosted a Joyce reading in Dublin.

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Kevin Wright, the president of Bloomsday Montreal, then added his greetings, briefly summarizing the evolution of the annual event from 1929, in Paris, where Sylvia Beach, publisher of the book, held a launch at her famed Shakespeare and Company bookstore.

Beginning in 1954, there were various sporadic pub-crawls in homage to the book. In 1962, a Dublin bar owner, John Ryan, tracked down the actual house address that the fictional Bloom was said to have resided in with his wife Molly, discovered that it was about to be demolished and bought the door to be used in his new pub which instituted more regular celebrations.



Dr. Michael Kenneally – Image: courtesy of Bloomsday Montreal

Mr. Wright then introduced **Dr. Michael Kenneally**, the Principal of the Concordia University School of Irish Studies and himself an expert on Joyce. He first related Joyce's writing *Ulysses* during WW I as the great Flu of 1918-19 was aborning. Joyce, he said, was a noted germ phobic and this seemed to influence indirectly some aspects of his references.

Kenneally then dwelt on the themes of movement and quest as Bloom visited in one day, June 16, 1904, Dublin spots such as a library, a hospital, pubs and a brothel in a search for belonging.

An unexpected reference was to compare American reclusive poet **Emily Dickinson** who also searched for a sense of belonging but whose world terrain was solely her mind.

June 13

The Festival continued with a concert of songs and recitals of poetry.

Again, it opened with Dublin-born Ms. Fee, here singing a fine Irish song. I had seen her fine acting, such as starring in [The Savannah Sipping Society](#) at the **Hudson Village Theatre** but had not realized that she possessed a superior singing voice as well.

She then introduced the day's M.C. extraordinaire, former CBC host **Denis Trudeau**. His line up consisted of three men and five women.

The guys consisted of **Desmond Ellis**, an actor who had performed at the Toronto Bloomsday as well, **Brian Dooley**, a "spoken word" talent whose recital included his youth as an altar boy and singer **Patrick Hutchinson** who had been born on a St. Patrick's Day.



'But unflappable as usual, he [Trudeau] asked her "who are you?" to which she replied "The Emerald Princess", aka Carmen O'Reilly, pushing her own show...'

The gals included singers **Johanne Patry** with a rousing *Coming Through The Rye* based on a poem by Scots legend Robbie Burns, and opera singer **Geraldina Mendez** who discussed commonality between Joyce and German composer Richard Wagner (which puzzled me as well as host Trudeau) before launching into a dynamic opera solo which belied her slender petite build.

After a change of pace with poet/spoken word artist **Larissa Andruyshyn** and a recital by born-in-Belfast CBC host Anne Lewis, the show concluded (we thought) with an Irish song by ever-popular local **Kathleen McAuliffe**.

Ah, but even though only online, there was an encore!

Mr. Dooley discussed and Ms. Patry sang about the "New Jerusalem", one of many musical allusions in Joyce's work (but which here seemed to have something to do with Toronto!)

Again, the ending BUT... a seeming intruder Lady burst onto the Zoom tube, puzzling host Trudeau.

But unflappable as usual, he asked her "Who are you?" to which she replied "Carmel O'Reilly on the *Emerald Princess*". The Lady then proceeded to push her own show which will be included on Sunday afternoon, June 14.



Bloomsday Festival walk 2019 – Image: courtesy of Bloomsday Montreal

June 14

Sunday morning featured, as in past years, a **walk through Irish Montreal** (largely Griffintown) but this year a



virtual walk. Viewers saved shoe leather as they heard teacher/historian **Donovan King** guide them around various historic sites, commenting on local lore and legend.

In the afternoon, the Lady on the *Emerald Princess* of the day before turned out to be local prolific playwright **Colleen Curran** reprising her solo show of a few years ago, *Ireland's Own Carmel O'Reilly Tonite!*, wherein she portrayed a fictional singer/raconteur. To me, this was inspired by Carmel Quinn, the popular TV star of the 1950s *Arthur Godfrey Show*.

Ms. Curran then read parts of her newest play, *The Sunset Gals*, which I had seen an earlier reading of in April 2019 at the Redpath Museum. It was part two of *In The Key of Agatha Christie* and viewers can see that double review [here](#).

Ms. Curran also read bits from her novels *Something Drastic* and *Out for Stars*. She now has her own YouTube, [Kitty Calling](#).

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June 15

The day featured an **Academic Panel** with some international speakers. Overall presenter Kathleen Fee introduced the host, none other than one of the performers from June 12, **Geraldina Mendez**, admirably suited for the job. Long an enthusiastic Joycean, she is originally from Columbia, has studied and performed in Ukraine and so speaks Russian as well as Spanish, English and French.

There were four panellists:

Marcelo Zabaloy of Argentina had translated Joyce into Spanish. Hard enough to translate any literary work into another language while preserving the "feel" of the original, but doubly hard with authors like Joyce with scads of wordplay and esoteric references!

Kayla Fanning, a young student at Concordia's School of Irish Studies, who focused on Ulysses "Aeolus" passages and the novel's criticism of journalism as "dead noise". (At least not fake news, I thought to myself.)

Peter Stockland, a former editor of the *Montreal Gazette* zeroed in more on the "how" of Joyce's word choices more than on the "what". He often referred to my favourite short story in *The Dubliners*, namely *The Dead*, wherein words connoted light, dark and shadows as well as slits, as befits the partially blind Joyce.

John McCourt, joining the panel from his Dublin base, stressed the landscape as character aspects of the novel, as the forested mossy hills of Ireland reflected timelessness.



Kevin Wright and Kathleen Fee in 2018 – Image: courtesy of Bloomsday Montreal

Wrapping up a **Q & A session** from the audience, Ms. Mendez posed, “What importance does Joyce have for us today?” Amusingly, this drew a blank for a minute or two from the usually wordy panellists. Mr. Stockland, I felt, had the best answer in that the musicality of the words lent readers a feeling of escaping the world more than mere text alone could do. (I would have replied the emphasis, as presaged by both Dostoyevsky and Freud, of blending inner thought with outward speech and influencing stream of consciousness writing as in Kerouac.)

Nice to see Ms. Fee signing off with crediting **Edmund Nash**, the visual facilitator and **Miles Murphy**, the sound monitor.

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June 16 – the actual Bloomsday

Kevin Wright hosted six readings of parts of the novel, arranged by the time in which each part appeared therein.

8 am – *At Martello Tower Steven Dedalus appears*, read by **Clive Brewer**, often seen at Westmount’s **Dramatis Personae** theatre.

10 am – *At 77 Eccles, where Bloom and wife Molly Sweeney Bloom reside*, read by **Liam Phelan Cox**

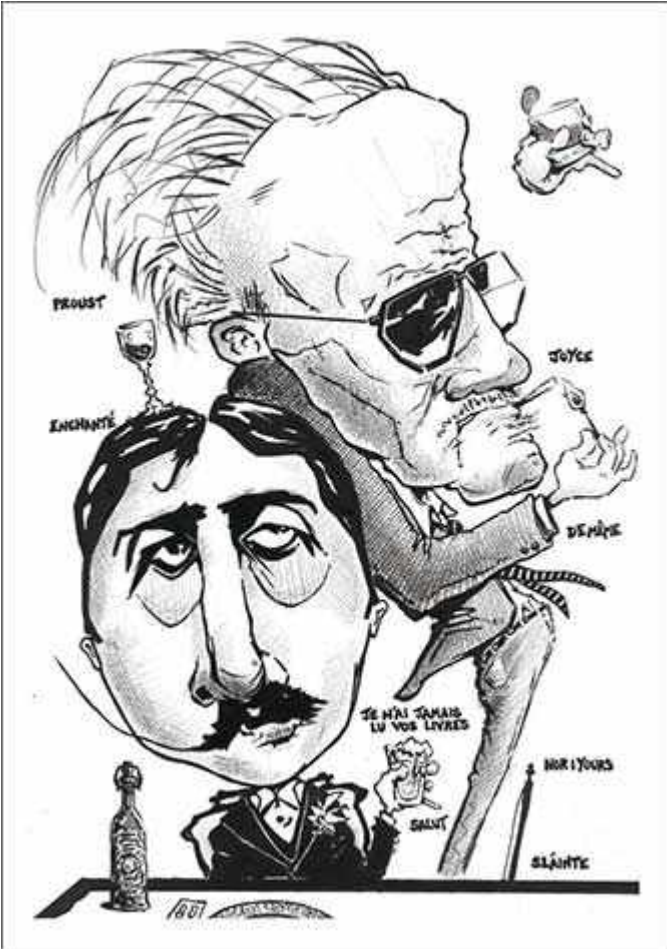


11 am – *Bloom on way to a funeral*, read by **Pat Machin**

Noon – *Bloom visits a newspaper office to place an ad*, read by Kevin Wright himself

8 pm – *Church Parish, Water everywhere, Bloom meets Gerdie*, read by **Maurice Podbrey** speaking from South Africa. Mr. Podbrey is the original artistic director of the Centaur Theatre.

2 am – *Bloom talks to Susan's father*, read by **Susan Jones Lombard** and **Alan Lombard**



Caricature of Joyce and Proust by Craig Morriss

After an hour break, during which past year's photos were paraded against a musical background, the festival ended with a bravura performance by Kathleen Fee reading **Molly Bloom's extended soliloquy**, found in final Chapter 18 of *Ulysses*, ending with the famous "Yes I said Yes". Singers Kathleen McAuliffe and Geraldina Mendez added mood songs at various points during the 90-minute session. I had not noticed before, but there are several references to Lord Byron in the text (good name, thought I).

Wonderful caricatures

Available all during the five days were many amazing cartoons of Joyce interacting with other famous writers he had



met. These included Proust, Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Beach, and Picasso. One can still see them on London, UK, artist **Craig Morriss**' site craigmorriss.co.uk

Feature image: James Joyce – [Ben Ledbetter, Architect](#) via [StockPholio.net](#)

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Byron Toben, a past president of The Montreal Press Club, has been WestmountMag.ca's theatre reviewer since July 2015. Previously, he wrote for since terminated web sites Rover Arts and Charlebois Post, print weekly The Downtowner and print monthly The Senior Times. He also is an expert consultant on U.S. work permits for Canadians.

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