

Me? A Dubliner?

CONAN KENNEDY



MORRIGAN

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morriganbooks@gmail.com

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Melissa Collins
<http://www.melissacollinsphotography.com/>

&

Tony Finn
https://www.instagram.com/tjp_finn/

Firstly

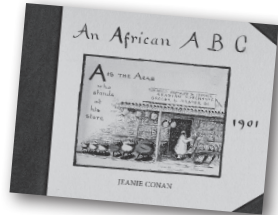
I'm writing this in Toronto, I have some business here.

Vaguely in connection with that business I recently visited the headquarters of *Toronto Public Libraries*. And there, in vacant and in pensive mood (Wordsworth) I browsed the online catalogues. Being self-centred and the world being all about me me me, this browsing soon drifted off into topics of my own personal interest, drilling through the catalogues right down to my own name.

Results? Depressing.

It turned out that none of my books had ever sat on a shelf in any of the many buildings of the Toronto library system. I might as well have placed them on a raft in the West of Ireland and pushed them out into the Atlantic, hoping they'd find landfall in Nova Scotia.

How and ever, the most fruitful of searches are those which reveal something unsearched for, and this one transpired to be just so. I came across a reference to a Jeanie Conan, an artist. I realised she was the same Jeanie who had been my Great Aunt, and who features in some work of mine. The *Toronto Library* system held a book she wrote...of which I'd never heard. It turned out to be a little Alphabet Book, with rhyme and illustration, written for one of her nephews. This she had created in South Africa, where she lived for awhile, and it had an African theme. How on earth it made its way to Toronto, I do not know. The fact that I too had lived in Africa, and had now made my way to Toronto, that was its own mystery. Ok I knew how I had gotten there, thank you *Air Transat*, but why?



I suddenly saw myself as having followed that book.

I went back to where I was staying, but stopped off in *Jingles Bar* at Yonge and St Clair, and there (in *Jingles Bar* at Yonge and St Clair) I considered the matter, deeply. Somewhere in midst of this



consideration I fell into conversation with another customer, he considering his own matters, deeply. He asked from whence I came. And then, that answered, he told me I didn't sound like a Dubliner.

"What does a Dubliner sound like?" I asked.

He had no answer.

Neither had I.

I went back to where I was staying. It was high in a high apartment block and I stood on the balcony looking out at the horizon, at other high apartment blocks. Did that for awhile. Then told myself, and mentioned it to the Toronto skyline, yes, yes that's what I'll do. I'll write an alphabet book, I've never written an alphabet book, I'm not getting any younger, now is the time, it may be too late, soon.

But what (I asked myself), on what, what subject topic theme, on what clothesline will I air my words?

Nothing came to mind.

But after a few glasses of wine it all became quite clear, bleeding obvious. I'd write an alphabet book on being a Dubliner. And here's a picture out my Toronto window just to make the point.

Figures.

Sorted.





is for An Introduction

Once upon a writing time I wrote a guidebook to Dublin's *Glasnevin Cemetery*. And there it is across the way, the cover of it anyway. Not at all an ancient institution, *Glasnevin*, nineteenth century, but huge. One of its corporate boasts is that it contains more dead Dubliners than are actually living in the city at the present time. Ok this is daft, as a concept, as a boast, but I repeated it. The writer of a guidebook is the humble piper, the tune wafts in from high.

Twenty years have passed since my fingertips did their duty on that keyboard. The cemetery has changed, and it now features a fine museum, a café, and a shop selling appropriately themed fridge magnets. The place has become a major tourist attraction. Those acres of tombstones I stumbled among are all cleaned up, and saved from dereliction. It is a pleasant peaceful place. Those twenty years have also wrought their change on me. I too am cleaned up, act wise. My house is built and paid for. Granted, the structure is at a stage where it's starting to fall apart again, and the age I'm at does have certain similar qualities. No matter. There's money in the bank and I can do what I bloody well like. So as with that cemetery, I too am in a pleasant peaceful place.

That noted, t'were well to not forget...this change thing is continuous.

Hebrews 13:14 reminds us well...we have not here a lasting city.

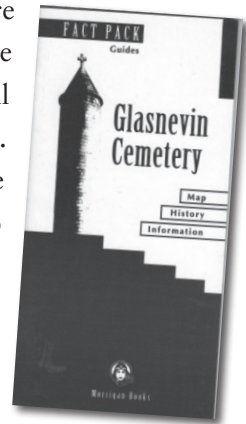
That cemetery is still huge, but it changes by the day, and has gotten even bigger. But then the city which it serves has done likewise. Whether the old boast of there being more dead around the place than living still obtains, I do not know. (Who's counting, for godsakes?) But what I do know is that the cemetery and its city are in some kind of race, and it can only end one way. The growth of Dublin is inexorable, and in the end the living denizens of Dublin will win, they will outnumber the dead. Well, they'll outnumber the dead in that particular cemetery anyway. Maybe even the totality of all the dead, of all the dead Dubliners, including those not buried in Glasnevin?

Maybe, quite likely in fact. After all, isn't there some statistic floating around to the effect that there are more people living on the planet now than all who have ever lived before? Of course there is. There's a statistic for everything. Including for the number of words a writer will use before he gets to the point.

The point?

There's a lot of dead Dubliners, and there's a lot of living ones. On top of which there's a lot of people living in Dublin who are obviously not Dubliners. Moldovans, Chinese, people like that. Doubtless in time their descendants *will* be Dubliners, just as the descendants of Vikings are now selling fruit in Moore Street. An aside...this is a bit of a comedown, isn't it? A falling off, for old *Bloodaxe Sven* and *Sigurd the Skulls* and those guys. One minute it's all rape and pillage and burning monasteries, fun stuff...and next the descendants are being picturesque for tourists and hiding dodgy bananas in amongst the sound.

Like it's all...a bit...yes, just a bit!



But on a positive note, we do have to be pleased that Dublin's modern immigrants are not heavily into rape and pillage and that sort of thing. Ok, granted, (have a look at page 44) they're not great at urban design, shopfront wise, preferring a retail look that's a cross between Moroccan Souk and Manila Slum, but we can take that, and must accept. After all, our immigrants are still Moldovans, bless! And Chinese. They haven't *quite* become Dubliners yet.

Another aside, I know where China is, you can't miss it, but I'm a bit iffy about the exact location of Moldova. No matter. What matters is that, as of time of writing, Moldovans and Chinese (in Dublin) are not Dubliners. They're terrible at shop design, and they're all sorts of other things too, depending on one's point of view. They're 'bloody immigrants' or, in pc liberal media terms, 'new Irish'. Both terms are equally insulting. The first description is just rude and the latter just patronising. Lookit, if I were a Moldovan or a Chinese I certainly wouldn't want to be a 'new Irish'. I'd prefer to be a 'bloody immigrant'. And yes I'd say, "I've come here specifically to take your women and your jobs and push up house prices...and build a horrible looking shopfront...deal with it."

Dealing with all this...

Bottom line is, there's 'persons living in Dublin', and there's 'Dubliners'. And they're not the same at all, at all. Foreign folks of a creative bent frequently use a horrible expression, declaring themselves to be 'based in Dublin'. This essentially means that they're not good enough or creative enough to be 'based in New York', but whatever. They're not Dubliners. Irish people of culchie origination sometimes use that expression also, but in their case they mean they're waiting to inherit a farm or a Centra shop in Offaly, or thereabouts. Or saving for a mortgage to buy a house in the well known Dublin suburb of Drogheda. They're not Dubliners either.



Melissa Collins

Thing is, while you obviously have to be living in Dublin to be ‘a person living in Dublin’, you don’t have to be living in Dublin to be a ‘Dubliner’. It’s a travelling quality, portable, you can bring it anywhere. In fact you have no choice but to bring it everywhere. It’s like the colour of your eyes, genetic.

There we have it.

Dubliners are born, not made.

And...no way is it sufficient just to be born *in* Dublin.

Sorry ’bout dat, but it takes generations, hundreds of years. I’d say two or three hundred years of one’s ancestors having been born in Dublin, that should do it. It takes about that for the DNA to adapt to the particular circumstances of the place. Evolution is still going on, remember that. None of us are at the end of a journey.

End of this rambling introduction, yes.

But that photo above.

The story? Here it is.

Myself and *Melissa-The-Photographer* spent a Sunday morning in the cemetery, wandering. Not knowing where to point the camera. So hither and yon she took the shots. But neither hither nor yon really suited my intentions so, after biding my time, I guided her down a particular path. And pointed. And this here photo remembers the moment. That rusticated granite cross marks the grave of my great grandfather, and also that of generations after. No names are marked upon that grave, by family tradition. Great Grandfather is reported to have said that *those who know who we are, they will know where we are*. Can't argue with that. And can only hope that the reverse is also true, *those who know where we are, they will know who we are*.

Dubliners.

There y'are. Moving right along...alphabet book...after letter A...which stands for A (rambling) introduction, comes...well, a decoration, below. But don't mind that, it's just a picture of a grating in a Dublin street. Giving character to the pathway...and to the page. So, moving on...after letter A comes...





is for Bride Street

Shopkeepers.

My people were shopkeepers in the Bride Street and Fishamble Street areas.

It's a while back now, we're talking 1600s.

Conans, by surname, their given names being the likes of Denys and James and Edward and John, these being passed down through generations. And there was a Jane. Some hundreds of years ago she was buried in *St John's Graveyard* at the top of Fishamble Street. It's a sward of green, the gravestones gone, but I do visit her sometimes. It's a place quite precious to me, for reasons that we'll see, read on.

The people called Denys and James and Edward and John got around, popping up at different addresses over the decades. They were obviously on the up, and on the move. And eventually one of the James's became a successful 'taylor' down in Trinity Lane off Dame Street. A posher location, close to Parliament and University. It's not there anymore, that lane. It's the entrance to a multistorey carpark. And not to one of the great multistorey carparks either...one of the lesser carparks, one of those that seems to have been designed to facilitate muggers and beggars rather than motorists.

A pity.

Any old how, James' house and shop is buried there now. And also buried beneath the gross structure, beneath this grim concrete

reminder that things can and do go wrong, down there below is the memory of the winding cobbled street itself. It appears in my mind like the set for a telly production, Dickens maybe, Poldark even, and it's often snowing.

Cue young couple walking by.

Camera, lights, action, and like that.

Melissa Collins



Those two passing now are the grandson of James and Agnes, the daughter of David, the clockmaker.

David has a shop in the same street.

Joseph and Agnes are a courting couple. His hat is at a certain angle. And she holds her skirts safe above the horse shit and the snow, and holds them maybe an unnecessary few inches too high. Skittish. Oh yes they will marry. The rest is history. And the rest is also the present, of course, where their descendant is an Irish writer sitting not far from *Jingles* in

Toronto, typing these words.

And remembering.

Another couple, hundreds of years later, they went on their first date to the *Lord Edward Pub*. And quite often during their years of marriage, went to *Leo Burdock's* chipper. And one half of that couple is this present writer. And must confess. Neither the pub nor the chipper illustrated are actually *in* Bride Street. But they are convenient to the location. Modern Bride Street bears no physical relationship to that of yore, and is remarkably unpicturesque. And *Melissa-The-Photographer* notices these things, and she controls the camera buttons.

So here we are.

Convenient to Bride Street.

Accepting the fact that writers are different.

Normal people have memories, and that's that. Writers have two caches of memory. One cache contains actual events that occurred to him/herself, whilst the other overflows with stuff that didn't. But nonetheless he/she remembers it. In normal people this calls for psychiatric intervention, whereas with writers it helps to sell books. I do actually *remember* John and Alice proceeding along in the early 1800s. Out of Trinity Lane and into Dame Street, more or less opposite Foster Place. It wasn't called Foster Place then, because John Foster was still alive. An unlikeable old cove, he had been Speaker of the Irish *House of Commons*, orchestrating the bribery and corruption which led to the fact that...on the particular day that John and Alice came out of Trinity Lane into Dame Street, the *House of Commons* was no more. The building was a bank, and had been so for twenty years.

This narrows it down.

John Foster died in 1828. It was thus the mid-1820s that Joseph and Agnes walked out here. It was a Thursday. That's definite, oh I know that. I know that because their walk was going to take them down Dame Street, up St Andrew's Street and thence to their destination, the fashionable Grafton Street. And and and...passing *St Andrew's Church* Joseph mentioned, *The Thingmote*. I clearly recall, he mentioned the fact that the church stood on the site of the ancient



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Viking meeting place. And he further mentioned that today, Thursday, that this was called after the Viking God *Thor*.

And thus it all hung together.

How could a writer forget a thing like that?

Impossible. Perhaps worth mentioning, before I move on, or before the men in white coats move in, worth mentioning that the *St Andrew's Church* of the 1820's is not the *St Andrew's Church* we see today. The original...well, not the original, there's been a church here since God knows when, but the one that Joseph and Alice passed burned down in 1860, and this new one dates from then.

The original church was octagonal, which is always nice.

However, octagonal or not, churches burn down, time marches on. Which reminds me. Another memory from a different cache. As a child I knew a clockmaker's shop by a bus stop in Sandycove. It was *my* bus stop for *my* coming home for school. The shop had a little porch, the door set back within, this forming a shelter from the rain. That door was always open. The clockmaker sat in the back of his shop, bent over work bench. But would check out people standing in his porch by bending his head forward so's he could look over the top of his glasses.

Satisfied, he would go back to work.

Unsatisfied he would shout out.

"Get the fuck out of my porch", or something similar.

Being an innocuous schoolboy, and small, I passed the test. It was unlikely that I'd run off with a grandfather clock under my arm, and so back to work he'd go. And I would stand there watching the rain and listening to the clocks. The ticking of one old clock is a rightly sinister sound. That of many old clocks together, disturbing.

Disturbing, or sinister or what, I nonetheless like to think of my ancestral Trinity Lane shop like that. Just...like...that. And I like to

think of some other small boy standing in the doorway. Tick...tock...tick. Tick...tock...tick.

Yes, I like to think.

So, does all this wrap up the letter B business?

More or less, but firstly, BTW. A social media acronym, BTW, by the way...

The letter B also stands for *Bayley's Court*, which is way over on the Northside off Summerhill. This is a modern apartment complex, and whether a community or not, it's certainly 'gated'.

Understandably, I suppose, Summerhill is a gritty enough area and I'd have my doubts about wandering around there after dark. (And me to have once lived in Johannesburg's Hillbrow district.) How and ever, gritty though it now be, I imagine the area has greatly improved since my ancestral John lived in the original Bayley's Court in the early 1800s. A 'court' in those days was essentially a little warren of tenement houses and/or cottages. Running water and sanitation was not a priority. Children did not wear shoes.

A question arises.

Ancestral John was son of ancestral James the tailor in Trinity place. And Joseph was the son of John, Joseph who married Alice.

Begat, begat, begat, all that. (Genesis.)

The question: Why was the son of a prosperous southside tailor living in a downmarket area of the northside?

The answer:

I haven't a clue. But the fact that I traced John back to such a location, does that amount to more evidence that I am a Dubliner? Like, is it necessary to have apparently impoverished folks in the bloodline to belong to that particular tribe? Sometimes it seems implied.

The jury is out.