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Finnegans second wake

It will be the greatest publishing event in Irish literature since James Joyce's Ulysses appeared nearly 90 years ago, writes Bruce Arnold

By [Bruce Arnold](#)
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The impenetrable *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce, is about to be reborn and, for Joyceans, the event will stain the white radiance of eternity with its effulgent rays of truth and comprehension.

In terms of Irish literature, it is the greatest publishing event since Joyce's previous masterpiece, *Ulysses*, appeared in 1922, [and was reborn in 1984]. In the eyes of some, it may even be a greater event.

Ulysses was the work of a genius, but for many a flawed work. *Finnegans Wake* is a simpler, more profound thing: a work of genius. Into it James Joyce put all his talent, energy and the genius of his mind from the birth of *Ulysses* until his own death 19 years later. A third of his life was given to this single book.

We have, of course, had *Finnegans Wake* for the past 70 years. It was first published on May 4, 1939, by Faber & Faber. Before that, we knew a good deal about it in the version known as *Work in Progress*.

As early as 1929, in an obscure collection of essays entitled *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, a group of writers who admired Joyce, including Samuel Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy, contributed their thoughts on the work. *Finnegans Wake* -- as it was to become -- was already appearing in a Paris literary journal called *Transition*, readers puzzling over it, losing their way but avid both for more of it and for some kind of key.

There is no key. This is a story of human life and at its heart is the family of Harold or Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, his wife Anna Livia Plurabelle, and their three children, Shem, Shaun and Issy. HCE, the father (Haveth Childers Everywhere), is a publican. Like his creator, Joyce, he hears words and builds with them.

ALP flows through the book, a majestic, all-embracing emblem of womankind. Shem is a writer, Shaun is a postman and Issy -- for 'Isolde' -- is a multiplicity of females, becoming two, then seven, then 28, while her two brothers eventually amalgamate into one person, ShemShaun.

That's a start. Next thing to say is that the text begins with its own ending, so that it is circular. This is where Vico comes in, one of the figures dealt with by Samuel Beckett in the collection of essays with the endless title. Joyce undoubtedly derived a great deal from Vico's main argument that the history of mankind develops in cycles and can only be understood by a study of the changing expression of human nature through language, myth and culture. Joyce was a master of all three and deployed this mastery supremely in the composition of *Finnegans Wake*.

Though the book is our starting point, its presentation to the world has remained corrupt and flawed through many reprintings over the past 70 years: the book was never re-set. The story, even in its pure state, is difficult enough. Added to that, there has been a sea of hazards deriving from mistakes in the compositional process unremedied in Joyce's own poor proof-correcting and from other editorial mishaps.

The situation with *Finnegans Wake* has been far worse than what happened with *Ulysses*. There has been a huge 20-year controversy raging over the text of *Ulysses*.

This derived from the re-edited version by Hans Walter Gabler. This appeared, first in the three-volume 'synoptic' edition, in 1984, then in the single-volume *Ulysses: The Corrected Text* in 1986. Many mistakes were made by the James Joyce estate, by the back-up team of Joyce experts, and

even by Hans Walter Gabler himself. But essentially his mechanism for re-editing was correct and it has been followed, in a different way but using the same basic approach, by Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon, the two editors of the new *Finnegans Wake*.

The theory follows, in a simplified form. The text of the book as published, the *Finnegans Wake* version of May 1939, was seriously corrupt. It contained obvious errors, spotted in part by Joyce himself, though he was a poor proof-reader of his own work.

In the long period of creating the book, which started in 1923 and culminated 16 years later, on the eve of the Second World War, with the edition, the book was re-copied, typed, set and re-set up to 20 times before final publication. This is where the errors crept in.

The manuscript record of the book is vast, including, most importantly of all, the 50-odd notebooks kept by Joyce during composition of *Work in Progress*. These are the building blocks of *Finnegans Wake*; they tell the story of the book and of the writing of the book.

Modern editorial theory and practice, followed scrupulously by Gabler in *Ulysses*, with Danis Rose's participation in that project and his endorsement of Gabler, is to invoke all this material, get back into the mind of Joyce, and deliver as pure a text as possible.

Danis Rose had proverbial good fortune. At a Dublin conference to which he had not been invited, he chose a seat near the front and found himself beside a New York scholar, Tom Cowan, Professor of Roman Law at Rutgers. This man, on hearing of Rose's ambitions in Joyce studies, offered him accommodation in New York and help in seeking out the background to *Finnegans Wake* in the University of Buffalo.

This university, at the end of the Second World War, sought out Nora Joyce in Paris and bought the lion's share of Joyce papers, outwitting the Joycean bibliographer John Slocum, and bringing to the US a treasure trove.

Its principal asset may have been the notebooks. They were certainly the inspiration to Danis Rose, more than 30 years ago.

He was greatly helped by the head of the manuscript department, Karl Gay, who gave him a free hand in what can only be likened to a literary Fort Knox, stuffed with nuggets of pure gold. In entering the climactic editing zone for Joyceans, Danis Rose found himself embarking on the creation of a pure text of James Joyce's last and greatest masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake*.

Danis joined forces with his brother, John O'Hanlon, trained in theoretical physics, and the two men embarked on a 30-year task of restoration, emendation and editorial creativity. Theirs has been a lifelong service to Joyce scholarship and to the creative genius of James Joyce.

It was not an unbroken journey; in addition to working with Hans Walter Gabler, Danis Rose was involved also in the editing of the 62 volumes in James Joyce Archive, one of the most massive literary ventures of the 20th century.

At a personal level, he was of great service to me in the complete revision and preparation of the third, revised edition of *The Scandal of Ulysses*, my biography of a 20th century masterpiece. We travelled to New York together to work on a film about *Ulysses*, one of three films about James Joyce that have become the record of many personal statements about the perilous, difficult writing life of Joyce.

The new *Finnegans Wake* is an object of great beauty. The 504-page book is set in Dante, a typeface designed for the book. It is printed on heavy, off-white paper; its size an impressive 285mm by 200mm. It is lovingly designed and made to measure up to its author's posthumous expectations.

Described by Seamus Deane, another scholar supportive of what Danis Rose and his brother have achieved, as "astonishing and pleasing beyond measure", it has been designed and printed under the direction of Europe's finest private-press printer, Martino Mardersteig, as his last such venture before retiring. He will be coming here for the launch of the new *Finnegans Wake* in Dublin Castle next week.

For more information, visit www.houyhnhnmprint.com. Email: wakef2@gmail.com

- *Bruce Arnold*

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