

# making | culture bloom

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## — EDITOR'S NOTE

This paper was originally delivered as the Telstra Address at the National Press Club in Canberra on 16 June 2004. The speech marked the occasion of the establishment of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), a new umbrella body representing the diverse but allied interests of researchers, educators and practitioners working across those disciplines. Iain McCalman rose to speak to a room full of academics, administrators, practitioners and policy experts who had descended upon the national capital to meet with federal parliamentarians to exchange views and learn about each other's work. Before the afternoon was out, that audience would bring CHASS into existence at its inaugural general meeting. As McCalman noted, it was an auspicious day indeed.<sup>1</sup>

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On 16 June 1904, exactly one hundred years before the establishment of CHASS, an Irish Jew of Hungarian extraction called Leopold Bloom set off on a twenty-four hour perambulation around the streets and bars of Dublin.<sup>2</sup> This fictional incident is the basis of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the greatest novel of modern times. It has also given rise to Bloomsday, a kind of Irish literary holy day celebrated in cities all around the world. It was a specially appropriate moment for us to celebrate the birth of our new peak body, because Bloomsday provides a perfect parable for why the Australian public and government should cherish our sector.

How is it a parable? For a start, Bloomsday shows us the serendipitous way that humanistic culture can bring economic benefits to a nation, or to use the jargon of our day, how it

can produce commercial spin-off. James Joyce could not have imagined that his novel would one day generate festivals around the globe, as well as a swag of income for his country of birth. When he wrote the novel, just after the First World War, he was, as usual, desperately poor, and *Ulysses* didn't have the look of a commercial goer. Not only was it one of the most unorthodox and intellectually demanding novels ever written, it was also bawdy enough to be banned in much of the western world. Though Joyce loved Ireland with a passion, he wrote *Ulysses* in part as a satirical blast against the materialism and narrow-mindedness of his day. An early example of the humanities brain drain, he fled in exile to Europe where he spent the bulk of his later literary life. It was from there on 16 June, twenty years later, that he wrote wistfully in his notebook: 'Will anyone remember this date?'<sup>3</sup>

What a change he'd find, if he could return to his homeland today. Last year, being the centenary of Poldy Bloom's Dublin walk, the celebrations in Ireland were especially frenzied. Bloomsday became a five-month-long festival called 'Re-Joyce 2004', extending from April through August.<sup>4</sup> Organised by a specially convened government committee, it featured a carnival of parades, multimedia spectacles, exhibitions, films, street theatre, concerts, dances, lectures, conferences, seminars, sports events and tours. More recondite Bloomites could even attend a Yiddish Ceildhe on the Esplanade. The head of the Irish state was the official sponsor of all these activities and presided at such commemorative events as the 'parable of the plums'.<sup>5</sup> This is an incident in the novel when two old ladies clamber up on Nelson's pillar to ruminate about life and spit plum pips at the passing citizenry. Since Nelson's pillar was long ago blown up by the IRA, the festival had to make do with its replacement, a building called the Spire situated on O'Connell St at the edge of the River Liffey. In true Bloomsian fashion Dubliners call this tremendous tower 'The Stiffy on the Liffey'. James Joyce would have approved.

Joyce would also have found, if he could return to Dublin today, that conditions have become a great deal more hospitable for writers like himself. For a start, he'd not have to pay tax on the earnings of *Ulysses* or any other of his writings. Since 1969, the work of creative artists, writers and musicians has been exempt from taxation.<sup>6</sup> If he wanted to finance a film such as *The Dead*, the movie based on one of his short stories, he'd find that the government would contribute up to twelve per cent of the net budget.<sup>7</sup> And he'd be immediately elected into the Aosdána, an elite academy of two hundred of Ireland's most distinguished creative artists, writers and musicians. Here, like his fellow academicians, he'd be paid the Cnuas, a government stipend of over \$20,000 a year to encourage him to keep writing full-time.<sup>8</sup>

These enlightened policies were instituted from the end of the 1960s by Fianna Fáil's Charles Haughey, mate of Bob Hawke and political rogue—a Bloomsian figure par excellence.<sup>9</sup> At the time, Haughey's motivation for these policies was more nationalistic than economic. He wanted to re-invigorate national pride in Ireland's extraordinary history of

cultural achievement. He wanted to remind his countrymen that their small nation had in modern times produced playwrights like George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, John Synge, Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett; poets like William Butler Yeats, Louis MacNeice and Seamus Heaney; and novelists like James Joyce, Molly Keane, Anthony Cronin, Arthur Carty, Sean Ó Faoláin, Liam O'Flaherty, Bryan MacMahon, Flann O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. Though there was never was a more knockabout and down-to-earth politician than Haughey, he dreamed of Ireland becoming a Mecca for creative artists and musicians from all over the world, a land that was once again legendary for its bards and scholars.

The extent of his success can be attested, I think, by relating an Irish joke. This is the one Irish joke that the late, great Irish-Australian historian from Canberra, Professor Oliver MacDonagh, would ever allow. Fortunately, Ambassador Kelly allowed it too.<sup>10</sup> It goes like this. It is the 1960s and times are still hard in Ireland, so much so that Paddy leaves Cork to go to London to look for work. Here he meets up with a cousin in the building trade, Brendan, who says 'Don't worry, Paddy, that you've never worked as a builder before, I'll word up the foreman, not a problem.' The foreman, however, is English and proves to be a stickler for proprieties. Let's call him Honest Johnny. He says to Brendan, 'Oh no, oh no, oi can't employ your cousin wivout first testin' 'is credentials.' So he goes up to Paddy and says, 'Ere,' he says, 'I wan' you to tell me the difference between a girder and a joist.' 'Ah, that's easy,' says Paddy, 'you can't catch me on that one. Goethe wrote *Faust* and Joyce wrote *Ulysses*.'

Haughey and his political successors would, I know, be proud of Paddy's credentials, and prouder still of the long-term economic effects of Ireland's cultural policies. At that time Irish governments didn't have the advantage, as we do now, of the eye-opening recent study *The Rise of the Creative Class* by distinguished US economist Richard Florida.<sup>11</sup> This book argues a compelling case for why cultural industries have become the most powerful engines of economic growth in modern knowledge-based societies. Ireland's creative class is one reason—though not the only one—that their economy is booming to the point where the country is now known as the Celtic Tiger.

And way across the world in the Pacific, in a country with a tiny population even smaller than Ireland's, somebody, it seems, has been attending to this example. If you happened to watch the Oscar ceremonies last year, you'll have seen the envy and incredulity of US movie pundits when New Zealand snatched eleven Oscars for *The Lord of the Rings* and narrowly missed another for a performance in *Whale Rider*.<sup>12</sup> Of course we Australians, whose film industry has long been acclaimed and who like to patronise our cousins across the Tasman, tend to put this down to luck. But is it? When Helen Clark became Prime Minister of New Zealand in 1999, she deliberately also took on the post of Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage.<sup>13</sup> Her government then launched a far-reaching funding program to stimulate culture and arts in the cities, the countryside, in schools, and in business. The last four years has

seen an \$87 million injection of public funds into this sector. Rogernomics has been dumped in the bin, and New Zealand has consciously decided to mount an arts-led economic strategy.<sup>14</sup> Cultural creativity is now seen as a core competency that will bring the country decisive regional advantage. And it seems to be working: New Zealand unemployment is at a record low and their dollar is challenging our own. By the beginning of 2001, well before the stimulus of *The Lord of the Rings*, New Zealand's creative industries were contributing more than half the GNP of the country's traditional staple, agriculture, and generating twice the annual growth rate of the economy as a whole.

Of course, to achieve economic pre-eminence as a creative nation it's not enough to invest only in the *applied* sides of humanities, arts and social sciences. Bloomsday didn't come about through state investment in tourist agencies and public relations firms, important as these are. It grew out of the unanticipated effects of a literary work of enormous scholarly erudition and originality. During the 1940s Dublin writers began quite spontaneously making pilgrimages in Poldy Bloom's footsteps.<sup>15</sup> With a copy of *Ulysses* in hand they would trot along to Davy Byrne's pub to drink burgundy and eat gorgonzola sandwiches, or they would stand quietly in Glasnevin cemetery to remember Paddy Dignam's funeral. This is how Bloomsday was born and this is how cultural serendipity works.

To their great credit, our colleagues in science and technology have managed to convince many politicians that investing in basic research is crucial, both for its serendipitous economic consequences and because it helps to stimulate a culture of innovation essential to any aspiring knowledge economy. All too often, however, the same logic is not applied to our sector. Like James Joyce in the 1920s, we're used to having our work held up to public ridicule. Whenever Australian Research Council grants are announced, it's become an annual ritual for journalists like Andrew Bolt of the Melbourne *Herald-Sun* to jeer at the list of humanities and social science subjects funded.<sup>16</sup> These cheap shots are in turn relayed to our paymasters in government, and, ridiculously, we once again find ourselves lodged behind the funding eight ball.

The long-time favourite target of the jeerers has been the idea of studying Old Norse sagas. I don't know how many times that subject has been thrown in my face as an example of useless humanities research. There happens, you see, to be a world-famous Australian scholar who works in this field and who has earned a number of ARC grants over the years. It's never occurred to these critics that we should be as proud of this scholar's international distinction as we are of those Australians who win gold medals in trapshooting or the high jump. No, this type of work is castigated as a waste of public money. It's lucky that Oxford University didn't share this opinion when it funded the Merton Professor JRR Tolkien for forty years to research and teach on the subject of Old Norse sagas.<sup>17</sup> Otherwise he would not

have been able to write *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the most successful and influential books of modern times, and, as a result, a young New Zealand film-maker called Peter Jackson would not have been inspired to make a movie which is helping to transform New Zealand's cultural fame and economy.

And if what I'm saying seems a little too far from home perhaps I can offer you a small example from personal experience of how supposedly 'useless' humanistic research can produce unexpected spin-off. A few years ago, as the by-product of some research I was doing on eighteenth-century political thought, I became intrigued by a European alchemist and charlatan who called himself Count Cagliostro.<sup>18</sup> He was a kind of fantastic rogue—another Poldy Bloom figure, I guess—and I couldn't believe that his riveting story was not more widely known in the English-speaking world. An American-Australian literary agent persuaded me to write a biography built on scholarly research but aimed at a broad readership. The book is no *Lord of the Rings*; still, *The Last Alchemist*, as it's called in the USA or *The Seven Ordeals of Count Cagliostro* as it's known in Australia and Britain, has helped to fill the Australian taxman's coffers. And further spin-off is possible: it's being translated into nine different languages; an Australian company, FourthWall, is currently working to negotiate a film with Hollywood; Gary Cooper's daughter wants to make a Broadway musical out of it; and Suhrkamp Press in Germany is currently considering a play on the subject.

I'm not trying to skite: all this may come to nothing, but it does suggest that our scholarly research can have unexpected commercial applications, and that the rest of the world is interested. But if such opportunities are to benefit Australia, it's essential that we have a level playing field with our counterparts in the science and technology sector. It would help, for example, if we, too, could attract industry partners with Research and Development tax concessions to help us to commercialise our work, or if we, too, were able to set up Co-operative Research Centres in humanities, arts and social sciences to disseminate our ideas to potential users. It would help, also, if our ideas were recognised not only for the commercial profit that they might bring but also for the public good that they can do.

There is a further reason, also, why it's vitally important that we should become partners with our colleagues in science, engineering and technology: it is that no sector is likely to engender a culture of innovation in isolation. True, none of us knows for certain how to trigger innovation, but, even here, we can learn something from Poldy Bloom. Believe it or not, *Ulysses* was a supreme example of modern innovation. Through it, Joyce did for literature and culture what Einstein did for physics and Darwin did for biology. He revolutionised the very form and structure of the novel. Not even Shakespeare had been able to reveal 'the thousand complexities' that crackle through the minds of Joyce's wonderful cast of characters.<sup>19</sup> Joyce's interior monologues and streams of consciousness enabled the novel for the

first time to make raids into parts of the psyche where no writer had gone before, and there to capture the dark, inarticulate and irrational flux of human experience. In Poldy Bloom, Joyce created a character more completely than anyone since Shakespeare, and he did this, not by borrowing his insights from the humanities alone, but by employing the full circle of human knowledge. Poldy Bloom, as Joyce said, was 'a cultured allroundman': his intellectual matrix included physics, medicine, botany, politics, journalism, music, philosophy, architecture, theology, art and on and on.<sup>20</sup>

Great intellectual breakthroughs and new paradigm shifts are often made like this, through strange and unpredictable conjunctions of knowledge. But getting innovation to take properly within a society and to ramify right through that society's culture is another matter altogether. History suggests that almost every major innovation will meet virulent opposition from traditional and vested interests. When Joyce first published *Ulysses* in 1922 the howls of outrage from clergymen, politicians, academics and fellow writers could be heard, Krakatoa-like, across the oceans. The book was still banned in Australia when I migrated here at the end of 1965. That Joyce's ideas survived to transform art, aesthetics and cultural practices all over the globe owed much to the activism and abilities of scholars who carried his insights to broader publics and who overcame entrenched resistance. Joyce joked that he'd keep the professors busy for hundreds of years, and so it's proving.<sup>21</sup> But without such a culture of critical scholarship, innovation can easily be stillborn. During the late eighteenth century, France boasted the most innovative science in the world, but it was not France but Britain that accomplished the industrial revolution. Part of the task of our sector is to ensure not only that Australians are innovative, but also that we apply that innovation widely, intelligently and responsibly through our society.

We're able to do this in part because we study how cultures and societies work, especially our own. One reason that *Ulysses* is being so celebrated in Ireland today is because it embodies and represents the culture of an entire nation. It's been said that if Dublin was to disappear tomorrow we could reconstruct its history, literature, music and architecture, piece by piece, from Joyce's pages.<sup>22</sup> Above all, we could recreate Ireland's values—the country's deepest hopes, fears and aspirations as they are felt in the bone. In Australia today we can't depend on James Joyce to do this for us, but we urgently need some equivalent. Unfortunately, our sector was unable to win our plea for a fifth National Research Priority, one that focused on understanding Australia's own history, society and culture. As it happens, the National Endowment of Humanities in the USA has just introduced an equivalent priority there. It's called 'We the People—significant events in US history and culture'.<sup>23</sup>

Today in Australia, by contrast, when the Sydney University English department wants to teach the novels of our Nobel prize-winning author Patrick White, they have to distribute photocopies to the students because his books are no longer in print. Key parts of our history

and culture are now as endangered as our rarest flora and fauna. This is why the Academy of the Humanities, Macquarie University and Sydney PEN have just signed a joint agreement to test the possibility of producing a really major anthology of Australian literature.<sup>24</sup> We want to be able to teach our kids their cultural heritage, and to show other peoples around the globe what makes us tick. Of course, it's hard to make such a costly publication a commercial goer so it may not get off the ground, but it will be a sad day for Australia if it doesn't.

Finally, *Ulysses* serves as a parable because it reminds us of something we all know but are inclined to take for granted: namely, that the humanities, arts and social sciences are central to any civilised and decent society. This is because they are about what it means to be human. They need to be fostered and cherished, not as handmaidens of science and technology, but for themselves, and as equal partners. At the heart of our work lies a core concern of all Australians—that of human values. The most urgent social issues of our day depend on us getting those values right. Consider the national research priorities—to ensure that our people are healthy, that we have a sustainable environment, that we can benefit from new technology, and that we live in a country safe from terror.<sup>25</sup> It is surely blindingly obvious that these goals cannot be accomplished by investing in science and technology alone, crucial as these sectors are. We've long known the medical fact that obesity in children represents a health risk. We've long known the science to prevent the degradation of the Murray River; we've long known that our population is using too much water, but to solve these problems we must address resistant human behaviour. That cannot be done without involving our sector absolutely centrally. Most of us know in our hearts that spending more money on technological surveillance or on squads of gunmen is not really going to make us safer. Understanding our own peoples, as well as those of our region and our globe, is much more likely to do that.

Poldy Bloom was an ordinary, humdrum man in many ways, but he knew all this. Despite the setbacks and anti-semitic jibes that he encountered as he wandered the streets of Dublin, he did not develop what Yeats called 'a fanatic heart'.<sup>26</sup> He refused to resort to anger and violence. It's for this reason, more than any other, that he is loved and celebrated all around the world today. He is Ireland's greatest ambassador of tolerance, humour and compassion, and he is ours too. He is each one of us and he is everyman—just as Molly Bloom is everywoman. Poldy is a modern Ulysses who prevailed over a thousand hardships, and we will too. That is why I urge all Australians, when they are asked in future if they will give their support to the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences to reply with the triumphant closing words of Molly Bloom: 'yes I said yes I will Yes'.<sup>27</sup>

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1. The editor of this paper is John Byron, Executive Director of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The paper was first published by CHASS in 2004.
  2. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, first published by Shakespeare and Company, Paris, 1922. All subsequent references are to the Gabler edition, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, Random House, New York, 1986.
  3. Richard Ellman, *Four Dubliners*, Norton, New York, 1987, p. 65.
  4. <<http://www.rejoycedublin2004.com>>.
  5. <<http://www.james.joyce.ie/templates/textcontents>>.
  6. <<http://www.revenue.ie/revguide/artisalexemption.htm>>.
  7. <<http://www.greenlightireland.com/ireland.html>> and <<http://www.arts.monster.ie/articles/film/print/>>.
  8. <<http://www.artscouncil.ie/aosdana/cnuas.html>>.
  9. See T Ryle Dwyer, *Charlie: The Political Biography of Charles J. Haughey*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987; Joe Joyce and Peter Murtagh, *The Boss: Charles J. Haughey in Government*, Poolbeg Press, Dublin, 1983; and John M Feehan, *The Statesman: A Study of the Role of Charles Haughey in the Ireland of the Future*, Mercier Press, Cork, 1985. On Haughey's friendship with Bob Hawke, see the Australian prime minister's speech in Canberra at the presentation of Ireland's Bicentennial gift on 12 July 1988, <<http://docushare.unisa.edu.au/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1425/1-6-18-7.pdf>>.
  10. Declan Kelly, the Ambassador of Ireland, was a member of the audience.
  11. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York, 2002. Published in Australia under the same title by Pluto Press, 2003.
  12. <<http://www.oscars.org>>.
  13. See Rt Hon. Helen Clark, Speech from the Throne, Opening of Parliament, 21 December 1999, <<http://www.executive.govt.nz/speech.cfm?speechralph=30162&SR=1>>.
  14. Sue Williams, 'Cunning Kiwis', *Australian Financial Review*, 18 March 2004, p. 48.
  15. Ellman, *Four Dubliners*, p. 65.
  16. See, for example, David English, '\$450,000 to Study Mobile Phone', *Sunday Mail*, 9 November 2003, p. 13; and Andrew Bolt, 'Grants to Grumble', *Herald-Sun*, 19 November 2003, p. 19.
  17. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1977.
  18. Iain McCalman, *The Last Alchemist*, HarperCollins, New York, 2003. Published in Australia as *The Seven Ordeals of Count Cagliostro*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2003.
  19. Ellman, *Four Dubliners*, p. 84.
  20. *Ulysses*, p. 193.
  21. Ellman, *Four Dubliners*, p. 66. This is often cited as a reference to *Ulysses* but it sometimes cited in the context of *Finnegan's Wake*.
  22. Ellman, *Four Dubliners*, p. 68.
  23. <<http://www.wethepeople.gov/>>.
  24. <<http://www.australiananthology.org.au>>.
  25. <<http://www.dest.gov.au/priorities>>.
  26. William Butler Yeats, cited in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Harcourt, New York, 1994, p. 419.
  27. *Ulysses*, p. 644.