READING ELLMANN READING JOYCE

JOHN McCOURT

“This [Ellmann’s *James Joyce*] is not the definitive biography of Joyce. I doubt that one can ever be written.”

The purpose of this essay is to describe the central role played by Richard Ellmann’s *James Joyce* in the reception of Joyce’s life and writings, to survey briefly Joyce biographies written before Ellmann entered the field, to examine how Ellmann constructed his biography, and to explore the extent to which his biography “made” Joyce both for critics and for a more general audience. Finally, the essay suggests that the Joyce community is moving into a post-Ellmann phase.

Ellmann’s reputation is justly an immense one, resting as it does on his biographies of three major Irish writers, Yeats, Joyce, and Wilde, as well as countless other editions of works, letters, occasional writings by each of them and a very considerable volume of critical and editorial work on a range of modernist writers. As his friend and colleague Ellsworth Mason put it in a view that would be shared by several scholars of his and of subsequent generations: “Many voices have spoken about modernism during the past thirty years, but none of them has been more cogent, or persistent than Ellmann’s.”

Yet, one

---


opus dominates everything else Ellmann ever wrote: his 1959 biography entitled simply James Joyce (and to a lesser extent his 1982 revised edition), an ample, magisterial, and, in places, definitive biography of the writer whom he presents as the quintessential twentieth-century modernist. While his acclaimed biographies of Yeats and Wilde are important within their fields, they never quite attained the status of his Joyce biography and neither have lasted the test of time as well as this latter; in fact, in recent years both have been at least partially challenged and occasionally superseded by newer critical biographies. Ellmann’s James Joyce, on the other hand, remains largely unchallenged, and in great part continues to shape the way in which Joyce’s audience understands and approaches the Irish writer.

What are the qualities that render Ellmann’s book so important? The 1959 edition in particular is an extraordinary achievement, the product of his being the right man in the right place at the right time; that is, in Dublin (and in the other Joycean cities), when enough of Joyce’s former companions were still alive, just at the time in which Stanislaus Joyce’s huge hoard of material was becoming available, but before any rival biographers entered the fray. His biography is a triumph of style, clarity, eloquence and readability. Written long before the computer age, in a style which puts that of most rival biographies to shame, it is an amazing compendium of information (a huge amount of which had never been seen before Ellmann published it), a chronological critical biography which proceeds successfully through a careful collage of life and letters occasionally interrupted by long, usually penetrating critical interludes. It is, in short, a superbly well-made story written not simply for professional Joyceans but for a more general readership. Its success was almost unprecedented, it achieved the status of being “definitive” almost overnight and rapidly became the Joyce biography everyone reads and returns to. If a fact is in Ellmann, we are told, then we need look no further. As Melvin J. Friedman put it, “Ellmann’s