

Calendar

Bittersweet

Irish Poetry and Prose

It used to be a more raucous affair, during the earlier years," says Dennis Wills of the annual St. Patrick's Day readings of Irish literature at his bookstore. "Now it's not as nutty." He sounds like someone looking back on his youth when he talks about the event that began two decades ago. He isn't Irish but has that nostalgic Irish tone — a bittersweet longing for things, persons, or situations from the past.

James Joyce tells stories of loss in *Dubliners*. In the one called "Eveline," the story's namesake loses her lover,

Frank, when she doesn't sail away with him to Buenos Aires. She's too afraid to leave.

Exile is death, in her mind. So she will return to her widower-father and the house where she grew up. If she'd gone with Frank, her story might have been a novel; instead, Joyce could barely fill a few pages.

At the bookstore in La Jolla, some traditions have remained as stuck as Eveline, and speaking to a reporter a week before the event, Wills reviews them. Anyone may read a passage from Joyce, Yeats, Shaw, or any other Irish genius, living or dead. Guinness beer and Bushmills Irish whiskey smooth things out. And people bring potluck to go with the corned beef that Wills provides. Music is part of the evening, too, especially if someone brings an

instrument or a good singing voice.

But it's not necessarily a "polite" event, Wills stresses. "People don't sit there quietly. They can eat and drink and belch and fart and do whatever they want — I don't care. They don't have to listen.

They can move around while people are reading. And if someone goes on too long, they'll say, 'Come on! Let's move on! Let's get on to the next one.' Under five minutes, he thinks, is a "decent" length for a passage.

Some favorite passages are repeated every year by people who have attended, well, religiously, and whether or not anybody really wants to hear them again. There are also recordings of both music and voice. For example, Wills always begins with a tape of Joyce himself reading from *Finnegan's Wake*. What passage is it? "Oh, I don't know. It's a raspy thing, his voice," says Wills.

"Have you ever heard it? It's sort of — It's something like —" He warms up for his impression of the cadence. "Dee-dee-do, dee-dee-di, dee-dah. Di-di-dah, dah-dah-di, dah-dee. It's a high-pitched but lyrical voice: he was very fond of the Irish tenor John McCormack."

In days gone by, the event went well past midnight. That hasn't happened lately. "We're getting older. And this time, since it's on a Sunday night, we have to get up for work the next morning." Nor does he know how much longer he'll continue the event. "We're going to start dropping off." Dropping off? "I mean, we won't last forever."

What about new

blood? Can't he get any new blood in there? "In recent years an angelic woman named Kathleen has been part of it. I don't know her last name. She's Irish and a harpist. She comes and plays, and we all melt and fall in love with her for the evening."

John Mood, another relative newcomer, and his wife, Stephanie, will read passages from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Says Mood, "Last year nobody read any Beckett, and I was surprised."

Mood used to be a professor at Ball State University in Indiana. "But I wasn't happy, so I resigned and came to San Diego and haven't worked full-time since." It sounds like the beginnings of an Irish story, but he's a "Texas German," he says.

He calls *Godot* one of the best plays of the century — he has seen 15 different productions — and reads some lines he has chosen for Sunday.

"What do we do now?"

"Wait."

"Yes, but while waiting."

"What about hanging ourselves?"

"Hmm. It'd give us an erection."

Mood continues, "It ends up in

stichomythia, meaning that each character finishes the sentence of the other. Beckett does that frequently."

But would he agree that Beckett doesn't leap to many minds as the quintessential Irish writer? After all, he wrote *Godot* and other famous works in French, and, like Joyce, lived in exile.

"Well, I don't mention this on St. Patrick's Day, but all the great Irish writers left Ireland," Mood says. "Beckett was home visiting his mother in Dublin when World War II broke out, and he went immediately back to Paris. He said, 'Paris in wartime is better than Dublin anytime.' Jonathan Swift left. He'd been on the wrong side [politically] in London and was later shipped back to Dublin, and it broke his heart, you know. But I don't mention those kinds of things at the reading, because the Irish are very sentimental about their country."

— Jeanne Schinto

23rd Annual Open Reading of Irish Poetry and Prose
Sunday, March 17, 8:00 p.m.
D.G. Wills Books
7461 Girard Avenue, La Jolla
Free
Info: 858-456-1800

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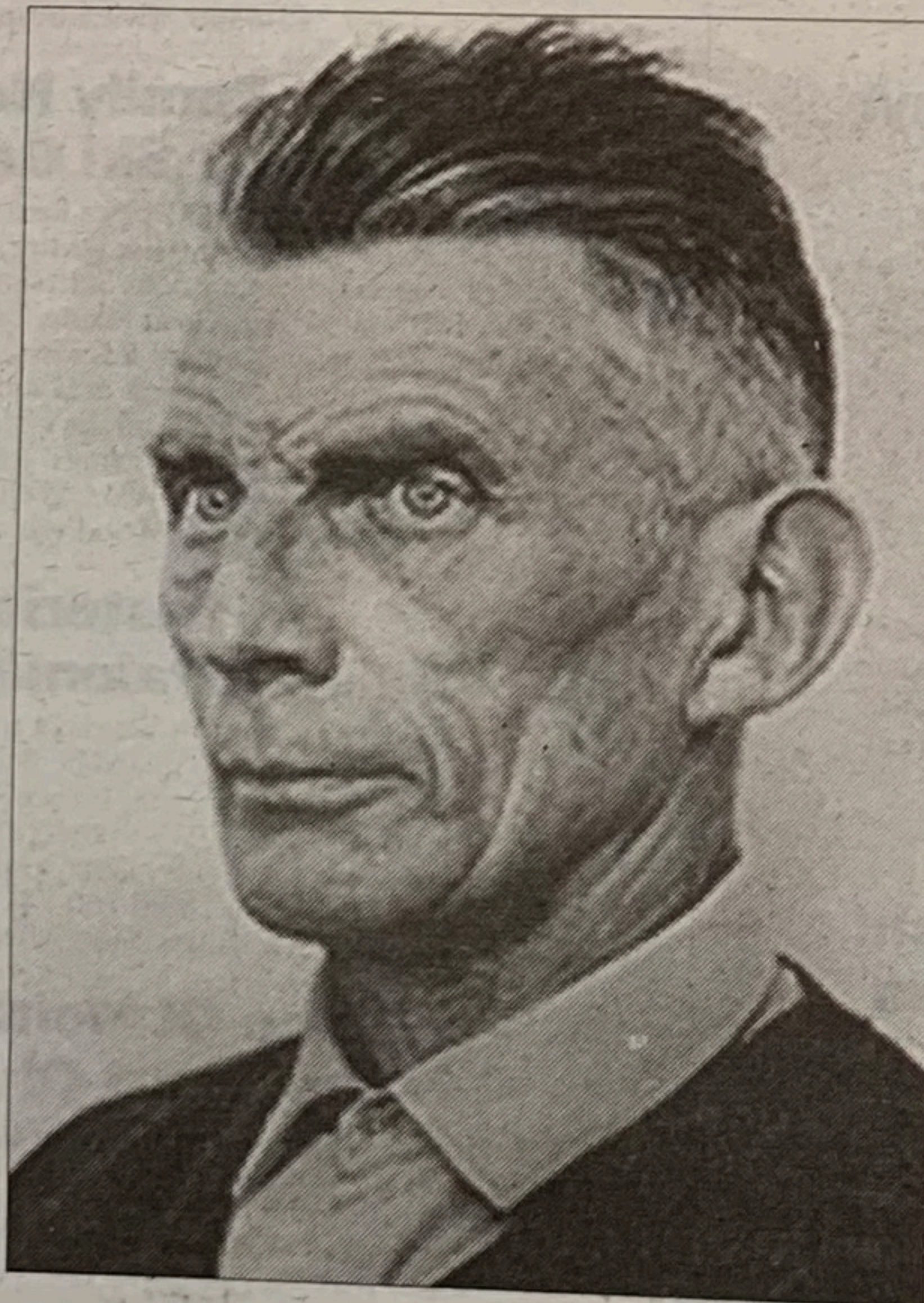
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LOCAL EVENTS



Samuel Beckett



1996 San Antonio production of *Waiting for Godot*