

MULLIGAN'S

Grand Old Pub of Poolbeg Street



Declan Dunne

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Declan Dunne is a journalist who works at RTÉ. His previous book, *Peter's Key: Peter DeLoughry and the Fight for Irish Independence*, was also published by Mercier Press.

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www.facebook.com/careforshane

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*Declan Dunne
Dublin, 2015*

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The nature of the business carried on in previous times on the premises that Mulligan's occupies is difficult to establish. It is described as a spirit grocer from its establishment in 1782 right up to the 1960s. These traders were forbidden to allow alcohol to be consumed on the premises but were allowed to sell it. Throughout the 1800s temperance campaigners, politicians and owners of other forms of licensed premises complained about spirit grocers violating the law. It is likely that one of the first owners of the premises, Talbot Fyan, was one of the many spirit grocers who ran what we know today as a pub, even though this was against the law.

The evidence for this is more tantalising than telling. A legal document from the 1850s describes Fyan's establishment as 'a well-known and long established grocery and vintner's establishment'. A court report in the 1860s, when John Mulligan ran the business, includes reference to a man drinking on the premises. It is more likely that both Fyan and Mulligan, under their separate ownerships, operated the outlet as a pub similar to other spirit grocers. The term spirit grocer, then, has to be treated carefully. It is used in the text but it is important to bear in mind that while Mulligan's was a spirit grocer by name, it was, at least from the 1860s onwards, a pub by nature.

There is also the question of when the business ceased to be a grocery. Remnants of the business can be seen in Mulligan's today. In the front bar there are hooks embedded in the ceiling which may have been used to hold scales or

baskets of fruit and vegetables. Working backwards, no one who frequented Mulligan's and who was interviewed for this book can remember fruit or vegetables being sold on the premises in the 1950s. However, in the 1960s headed notepaper was used by one of the owners on which was printed, 'John Mulligan & Son, Grocers, Tea, Wine & Spirit Merchants'. Again, this is scant evidence, as the date this headed notepaper was originally printed is not known.

The schedules of assets from the wills of two previous owners, Michael Smith, who died in 1962, and James Mulligan, son of John Mulligan, who died in 1931, list many items on the premises but none bearing any relation to the grocery trade. A newspaper report of a bird flying into Mulligan's in 1934 tells of it being given some seed, an indication that goods other than alcohol were then sold on the premises. When Talbot Fyan sold the premises in 1844, a list of items to be auctioned including furniture and fittings was published in *The Freeman's Journal*, but again there is nothing there to suggest that a grocery was part of the business.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012 a man went into Mulligan's and asked the barman, Gary Cusack, if he could see Billy. Thinking that the customer was referring to another barman, Billy 'Swiss' Phelan, Gary said that he was on holiday. 'No, not that Billy,' the man replied, 'I mean Billy in the clock.'

Billy Brooks Carr from Houston, Texas, who died in 2011, regarded the pint of Guinness in Mulligan's so highly that his brothers had some of his ashes flown 4,500 miles to Ireland where they were deposited in the base of the grandfather clock in Mulligan's bar. His family and friends continue to make pilgrimages to Mulligan's to drink a toast to his life and memory.

This is just one of the fascinating connections that Mulligan's has with the extraordinary, where distance and death are no obstacles. There are also links between the pub and Judy Garland, James Joyce, John F. Kennedy, British monarchs, Napoleon Bonaparte, the Oscar-winning film *My Left Foot*, Flann O'Brien, Peter O'Toole, Eusebio, the birth of rock and roll and a raid by the Black and Tans. These names and events might have been plucked out of an encyclopaedia, but all have found themselves in the index of this book.

No other building on earth has had within it the star of the *Wizard of Oz*, the 'Camelot' president and the author of *Ulysses*. It has also been the unlikely scene of extraordinary events over its more than 230-year history: unlikely, because it is off the beaten path; unlikely, because its owners and staff down the years have not sought to attract

attention; and unlikely because it has been, generally, impervious to change.

The pub also remains beneath the radar of encyclopaedias and is not given prominence in official lists of tourist sites. Despite all this, Mulligan's is known and loved by hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Quirkiness may be the key to the extent of Mulligan's renown and notoriety. It is an unscientific matter, quirkiness, but Mulligan's has managed to bottle it and uncork it in large measure. The quirkiness is built into the bricks and mortar, pervades its atmosphere and rises from its cellars.

Mulligan's does not have universal appeal. While it might provide the connoisseur's pint of Guinness, it is not everyone's cup of tea. Indeed, some former regulars speak of only the negative aspects of the pub. The reasons for this have more than one root. In the past, the great trade that the pub enjoyed meant that barmen, on occasion, did not have time to engage in over-the-counter conversations; this annoyed some customers who liked to chat. The rules in Mulligan's, such as the ban on singing and its strict abhorrence of unsavoury or over-excited conversations, do not suit all the customers. Some staff, in the past, who did not always obey the normal rules of courtesy, enjoyed exceptional loyalty from the owners. While this aspect of the pub annoyed some customers, who wanted errant barmen to be reprimanded by their bosses, others thought it intriguing and even found humour in the outbursts of brusqueness. While its bartenders today are regarded as exponents of courtesy, in years gone by some were devoid of this quality, or appeared to be devoid of it until customers got to know and appreciate their ways. They were what might be called 'characters', a description that, in Ireland at least, kindly absolves such people of all blame for breaches of convention.

The relationship in Mulligan's between bartenders and customers rests on at least two levels, based on how well

they know each other. First-time visitors might find the dynamics whirling about the premises fascinating or off-putting, depending on what moves them. Then there are the regulars. Familiarity, in the case of Mulligan's, breeds contest: who can outdo the other in mischief?

An example of this involved Mick Murray from Finglas in Dublin, who began working in the pub in 2001. One of the regulars, nicknamed 'The Minister', whose job it was to open and shut the doors of a nearby office, used to slip in and out of the pub during his shift. Before returning to work, he used to place a beer mat on top of his unfinished pint of Guinness as a sign that he would be returning to it, a practice akin to territorial swimmers stabbing the stem of their large beach umbrella into the sand. One day he returned from the lavatory to take a sup from his pint at the bar and found it would not lift off the counter. He was unaware that Mick Murray had glued the bottom of the glass to a beer mat and glued the beer mat to the counter. 'The Minister' tried a couple of times to release the pint, looking around before each attempt, afraid that he might call attention to himself. No one appeared to be taking any notice of him. Time was getting on. He had to return to work and so he put a beer mat on top of his pint, indicating he would be back. While he was gone, Mick used a scraper to release the pint from the stuck-down beer mat, and the beer mat from the counter. Less than five minutes later, 'The Minister' returned and found his pint still in place. A little nervously, he removed the beer mat he had placed on top of the pint and looked around. Other customers were chatting, minding their own business. He relaxed. He put his two hands around the bottom of the glass and checked that he was not being watched. Then he applied himself to his predicament, taking a moment before he wrenched the pint off the counter, only to find that it came away easily and at a ferocious speed. The contents shot out of the glass, over his shoulder,

splashing and thus 'baptising' two tourists on their first visit to Mulligan's.

The following day 'The Minister' returned to find that someone had turned his pint upside down on the bar, with the Guinness vacuum-locked inside. Having taken advice from other customers, he tried to retrieve his Guinness by slowly sliding the pint off the bar onto a beer mat to stop the stout escaping but, again, it splashed onto the floor. 'The Minister' threatened to report the interference with his pints to the co-owner, Tommie Cusack, but never did.

It is interesting that 'The Minister' did not complain. He stayed quiet because he knew he was in a world where jousting in mischief was to be expected, to be challenged and, if possible, to be defeated. The mark of the glued beer mat remains on the counter in the bar, a testament to one of the more unusual phenomena found in the pub - 'Mulliganarchy'. Within this small universe, however, there also exists professionalism and efficiency, as exemplified by the owners and staff, including the redoubtable Mick Murray.

Among the barmen, Noel Hawkins manages to convey irrepressible good form and serve as much wit as he does drink, even on the most trying of nights in Mulligan's. His reservoir of jokes consistently drowns customers in tears of laughter. He can hold his own with any off-the-cuff stand-up comedian. Noel became well known for calling time by reminding the many customers from Trinity College: 'Now, come on students, mind your grants.' This was generally uttered as he waged war on the carpet armed with a vacuum cleaner. Tourists in particular enjoy his constant repartee. On one occasion in the 1990s, a group of visitors from the United States ordered several Irish coffees. As the high maintenance beverages were being prepared, one of the group, in an attempt to make conversation, said: 'We came in here in 1980', to which Noel replied: 'I'm serving as fast as I can.'

Christy Hynes is also known for his high level of wit. He commands the respect and admiration of colleague and customer alike for his bar skills, and his deep interest in people and the world about him. However, there is one aspect of him that is rarely commented upon – his mastery of discharging a long, rambling request for drinks. This is generally submitted by an indecisive customer, continuing consultations with his entourage while placing his order. Christy deals with such challenges unflappably by sweeping his hands into action, selecting glasses, pouring drinks, uncapping tonic bottles, re-affirming the order, unloading ice and placing beer mats. At the appropriate time, he might ask the customer whether he has a twenty or fifty cent coin to avoid delay in foraging for change. Notes are handed over as the coin is passed, Guinness taps are lifted and the transaction is concluded with the crisp command – ‘Next.’

The task involves highly tuned motor skills, split-second decision-making on the sequence of drinks to be dispensed and a mathematical turn. Sometimes all this has to be carried out at the same time as the barmen hear a knock from the cellar hatch cut into the floor area, warning them that it is about to be opened. Christy overcomes this extra obstacle by deftly stepping around the plunge-threatening drop, not allowing it to interfere with the fluidity of the operation. The entire manoeuvre is executed with precision and versatility, proving that these qualities are not unique to a Bernstein, a Nureyev or an Einstein.

Billy ‘Swiss’ Phelan is wont to bless himself on seeing certain customers or utter phrases of foreboding such as ‘most merciful’ and ‘here’s trouble’. Customers at the upper end of Mulligan’s warning scale might hear him use the code phrase ‘Lán gealach’ (Irish for full moon) to another barman, alerting him that a touch of madness might ensue. Other customers, who have consumed more than their usual quota of drink, may hear him say ‘full of rubber’ as he

passes by, or, if they have been deserted by their drinking partners, 'Two down, one to go.'

Mulligan's, for stalwart GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) fans, becomes the centre of the universe after All-Irelands, a favourite day for Danny Tracey. The pub is a good twenty-minute walk from Croke Park, where finals are held. On All-Ireland days, the pub becomes the neutral corner for rival supporters. Poolbeg Street turns into a mosaic of team colours as the spillover from Mulligan's engulfs the area. Inside, supporters of one team discuss the minutiae of the game with supporters from opposing teams. Similarities to previous games are plucked from memories and put forward. Teenage sons and daughters look on and listen to the conversations. Younger children with soft drinks and crisps make their way through the throng of adults.

Danny Tracey describes such days as mayhem, but looks upon them fondly, particularly the Dublin All-Ireland football victories over Kerry in 2011 and Mayo in 2013: 'They were extraordinary. I don't think there was a tap vertical for eight hours. In 2011 the system crashed in the place, the cooler couldn't cope.'

Darran Cusack has inherited the cheeky and, at times, scathing wit of his father, Ger, and his grandfather, Tommie. His interest in golf and Manchester United draws him, at times, into conflict or camaraderie with customers, depending on their own sporting loyalties. One of the tasks he relishes is the weekly winding of the grandfather clock, which is done with reverence and a quiet word to Billy Brooks Carr, whose ashes lie within its frame.

Mulligan's is known for serving the best pint of Guinness in the world. Darran Cusack explained why the pub continues to enjoy this reputation:

Some of the reasons I've heard over the years have been the short draw on the line from the keg to the tap. There is less than two pints in our lines. Glass management is a big factor because we don't wash our glasses in dish washers. They are rinsed with fresh water all the time. It's not recycled

water. We don't do food so we don't have greasy glasses and we deep-clean them every six or seven weeks so that's a huge factor. We store the Guinness in batches of thirty kegs. In the cold room at any time there could be ninety. We use one batch at a time.

He cites one last factor, delivered with a twinkle in his eye: 'Of course, you need a good barman as well.'

Mulligan's latest recruit at the time of writing, lounge attendant Luke China, has adapted well to the daily life of the pub, despite coming from a very different culture. He returns to his native Dalian in north-east China for a month every two years, but has found in Mulligan's 'a home away from home'. He has earned the respect of the staff and customers for his work ethic. He regularly posts cartoons of customers on his Facebook page and endures with good grace the onslaught of teasing from them about his beloved team, Manchester United. Humour and sport have become a special hybrid language of communication between him and the locals. In the world of Mulligan's, what is foreign or different does not become a stumbling block to human interaction, but is embraced.

The Mulligan's enterprise is overseen by the Cusack brothers, Gary and Ger (Darran's father), who are much amused by the daily fascinations the pub offers. 'Only in Mulligan's' is a phrase much used by them. Aside from the rich mix of people drawn to the pub, there always appears to be something going on. Both Gary and Ger enjoy relating, or learning about, wacky episodes in the long-running Mulligan's drama. Neither is generally capable of keeping a straight face when talking about the many capers generated on the premises. Aside from appreciating and encouraging this colourful aspect of the business, Gary and Ger also apply, to a great degree, the skills of the licensed trade taught to them by their father, Tommie, their uncle, Con, and several bartenders who have worked for them. All this has made them effective curators of the grand old pub of Poolbeg Street.