

Newsletter

Embassy of Ireland Monthly Newsletter | December 2017



Green Lines

By Ambassador Helena Nolan

Hello again everyone and Happy Christmas! Somehow, it's December already and we are really enjoying our first Christmas season here as a family in Brussels, with visits to the wonderful Christmas Markets at St Catherine and in the little streets around the Grand Place. The lights are on, the air is crisp and everywhere looks even lovelier than usual. Our first experience of sudden Brussels snow was also quite spectacular, watching the streets and parks turn into scenes from a living Christmas card. In all my visits here for EU meetings in the past, I'd never seen such snowfall; not great for the traffic and getting home but really quite magical. It feels as if Belgium has managed to hold on to something of the delight of Christmas, with the excitement of selecting and bringing the tree from Wallonia and the lovely lighting up ceremony, the large thatched nativity scene at the Grand Place and the choirs singing on the steps of the Cathedral. Of course, there's lots to buy at the markets, much of it hand-made crafts and a lot of it international as well as Belgian produce, even an Irish Pub, which is great to see. The atmosphere seems to be as much about meeting up with family or friends to chat over mulled wine, hot chocolate, various types of molten cheese and other tasty bites as it is about buying gifts.

That ability to linger, whether over conversation, or while browsing the many colourful stalls, is something that it's good not to lose sight of in such a fast-paced world. Christmas is also an important time for charities and I was delighted to be able to support the formidable and fabulous women of the Association Femmes d'Europe and to help out at the Irish stalls at their annual Christmas Bazar on Sunday. Funds are raised for niche projects globally to help women and girls and the Irish Coffees (the best I've ever tasted), delicious sides of smoked salmon, the Avoca rugs, quirky woollen hats, linen aprons and much more were a sell-out.



The night before I was honoured to be a guest at the Gala Dinner for Handicap International Belgium, an NGO which does wonderful work with victims of mines and explosive weapons, often including very young children, and whose research Ireland has been supporting for some years. I launched their most recent harrowing report on the impact of Explosive Weapons on Forced Displacement not long after my arrival here and was pleased to reiterate my support by attending their fundraiser on Saturday night, which was attended by Princess Astrid, Foreign Minister Reynders and Axel Red, who performed a song she has written in honour of the victims of these weapons. If you would like to support Handicap International's Campaign you can find them on Facebook and on Twitter.



On the 99th anniversary of Armistice Day in Ieper, during which I laid a wreath at the Menin Gate for all the Irish fallen, I was reminded of the importance of ensuring that we, as diplomats, do our jobs well so that no one should again have to experience the terrible losses of the first world war. It's clear that Belgium, and the town of Ieper in particular, see these commemoration ceremonies as a sacred duty, to remind the world of what was lost and what remains at stake. These solemn and very moving occasions are a powerful reminder of the importance of peace and the personal sacrifices which have delivered it and which must never be taken for granted, as was the very poignant and timely documentary about John Hume which we screened and which many of you continue to mention to me.

Back in the office, it's as hectic as ever, as the team here work through our usual end of year tasks and also try to assist those who are heading home for Christmas. I've been back to Dublin myself recently for a Team Ireland trade seminar at the spectacular Croke Park Conference Centre which brought together all of our Heads of Mission and Agency colleagues to collaborate on Ireland's international trade strategy – Ireland Connected. It was a really useful and inspiring gathering, with lots of good ideas for 2018 and I hope to organise a joint Ireland/Belgian business seminar on areas of mutual interest, following on from a very successful Enterprise Ireland event held here recently and the successful re-launch of Beleire, the new name for the Belgian/Ireland Business Association. I was pleased to become Co-Patron of Beleire, together with the new Belgian Ambassador to Ireland, who travelled back here specially to join me and speak at the event,

which was held in Leuven. He's also arranged for some more of the Tintin books to be translated into Irish, if anyone is seeking an innovative Belgian/Irish Christmas gift.

Back in Dublin again, my former team and I were also nominated and shortlisted for a Civil Service Excellence Award for "World Class Civil Service" for our work on the negotiations to create a new treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. I was invited to join them at the awards ceremony at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham where, as a group of civil servants, we enjoyed the novel experience of walking in to a room on a red carpet, instead of being the ones standing on the side-lines organising the event. And if we had to be piped to the post by anyone, well it was great that it was by our wonderful colleagues in the Passport Office who were the winners for the new Online Passport Renewal Service, which I know many of you have used and appreciated in action.



I'm delighted to have achieved one of my objectives before reaching the end of my first year here and that was to establish the Embassy of Ireland Book Club. We had a really informed and engaging discussion here at the Embassy on Mary Costello's poignant and beautifully written "Academy Street". I'm already looking forward to our next book, Bernard MacLaverty's "Midwinter Break", set in nearby Amsterdam, which we will discuss towards the end of January, so put it on your Christmas list and get reading. The good people at Waterstones Bookshop here have agreed to get the books in and to offer a 10% discount for all of the Embassy of Ireland Book Club members, just mention at the till.

We hope to have lots of literature on the Agenda for 2018, including a possible reading of his new book by John Banville. In the meantime, I can recommend Claire-Louise Bennett reading a new short story at the gorgeous [Passa Porta bookshop](#) and international house of literature on Rue Antoine Dansaert. The fascinating Passa Porta interview with Colm Toibin, which I attended a few months ago, is also available on YouTube at the following [link](#). So, enjoy the books, enjoy the markets, enjoy the delicious chocolate and the mulled wine, everything in moderation, have a lovely Christmas break and looking forward to lots more working and talking together in 2018.

I am sharing one of my favourite Christmas poems, Advent, by Patrick Kavanagh on the 50th anniversary of his death.

Advent - Poem by Patrick Kavanagh

We have tested and tasted too much, lover –
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking

*Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.*

*O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning –
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.
Won't we be rich, my love and I, and please
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour –
And Christ comes with a January flower.*



Vote for the 2017 Arms Control Person of the Year

We're honoured to be nominated for Arms Control Person of the Year alongside Austria, Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, & Amb Elayne White Gómez of Costa Rica for our work on the nuclear ban treaty! Please vote for Ireland and our partners here: <https://www.armscontrol.org/acpoy>

Voting will close at 11:45 p.m. on January 5, 2018 and the results announced January 9, 2018.

SAVE THE DATE



Short Notice: short stories for long nights

Thu 21.12.2017 | 20:00 > 21:30

Acclaimed writer **Claire-Louise Bennett** will join Gerda Blee, Stuart Evers, Daniël Rovers, and Peter Terrin **on 21 December in Passa Porta** where she will read a new short story.

Claire-Louise Bennett's short fiction and essays have been published in several publications

including *The Stinging Fly*, *The Moth* and *The Irish Times*. She received the inaugural White Review Short Story Prize in 2013. Her critically acclaimed first book, *Pond*, was published in 2016.

When: 20:00 to 21:30 on Thursday 21 December

Where: Passa Porta, Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 46, B-1000 Brussels

Tickets: tickets cost €7 and you can reserve your ticket here:

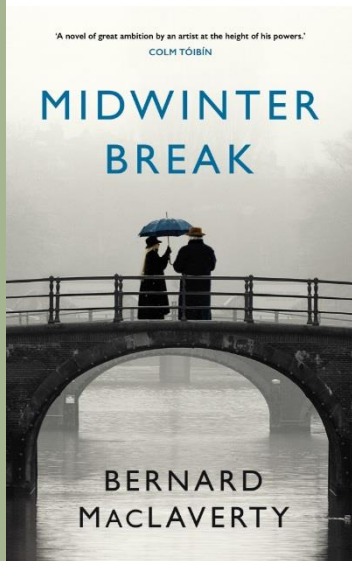
<http://passaporta.be/en/agenda/short-notice-short-stories-for-long-nights>



Screening of "Queen of Ireland" together with the UN Regional Information Centre

January 2018 - **We will inform you as soon as the exact date is confirmed.**

Join us in January for a screening of *Queen of Ireland* together with the United Nations Regional Information Centre to mark the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *The Queen of Ireland* is a 2015 Irish documentary directed by Conor Horgan which focuses on Rory O'Neill, better known as Panti, in the lead up to the historic referendum on marriage equality for same-sex couples in Ireland. You can watch the trailer for *Queen of Ireland* [here](#).



Embassy of Ireland Book Club

Join us **on Tuesday 23 January** (18:00 – 19:00) for the second meeting of the new Embassy of Ireland Book Club. The Book Club is reading books by contemporary Irish authors writing in English today, and meets every 6 weeks. For the next meeting we will read **Midwinter Break by Bernard MacLaverty**. Midwinter Break won the Novel of the Year award at the Irish Book Awards recently.

You can get a copy of the book in **Waterstones Brussels** – mention the Embassy of Ireland Book Club for a 10% discount! We hope that you'll join us! Please register [here](#) to attend.



New Year walk takes place on January 14th.

For more information please contact the Irish Hillwalking Group by email to walks@irishclub.be

Share the link below if you know someone who would like to receive a regular ICB Hillwalking newsletters: <http://eepurl.com/q3bVn>

Planning a Christmas/New Year getaway?

TravelWise

Stay safe and informed while travelling this Christmas and New Year with the DFAT's award-winning smartphone app [TravelWise](#).

The app allows you to register your contact details for upcoming trips to be used in the event of an emergency and contains comprehensive travel advice for 200 countries.

To download TravelWise visit the [App Store](#) or [Google Play](#) store.



Our Travel Advice is also available on the [DFA website](#).

Citizens' Registration

Irish citizens travelling or living overseas are encouraged to register their contact details with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This information will only be used to make contact in emergency circumstances and is separate from the Embassy mailing list.

For more information or to register, go to the TravelWise app or on the [Citizens' Registration page](#).

Christmas Closed Days

The Embassy will be closed on December 25th, 26th and New Years' Day.
Our 2018 closed days are available [here](#).

Warm Christmas greetings from all the Embassy team!



Follow the Embassy of Ireland Twitter for information and updates on events
[@IrishEmbBelgium](#)

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*Those who wish to be added to our **mailing list** can register [here](#)*



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