

# Curran Affairs – Frank McNally on the extraordinary friends (and relatives) of CP Curran

An Irishman's Diary

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Frank McNally

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On the ship that brought Napoleon to St Helena, apparently, there was an Irishman named MacGahan. Not much else about him is recorded except he later emigrated to the US and married his second wife, one Esther Dempsey, on September 19th, 1841, the feast-day of a certain third-century Italian saint.

This last detail explains why a son born three years later in Ohio came to have the extraordinary name of Januarius MacGahan.

Also extraordinarily, the latter is now one of two Irishmen to have streets named after them in Sofia, the other being Limerick-born JD Bouchier. The streets do not intersect. Neither did their lives. But Irish roots aside, the men had a lot in common, not least that they became Bulgarian heroes through the medium of journalism.

MacGahan's short but remarkable life was strongly influenced by an important cousin, one Philip Sheridan, a first-generation American of Cavan parents. A union general in the Civil War, Sheridan is now notorious for saying "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead", although he denied ever doing so.

Either way, while acting as military observer during the Franco-Prussian war, he persuaded the New York Herald to hire MacGahan – a failed legal student turned linguist, as war correspondent – launching the younger man's career.

MacGahan blazed a journalistic trail first in France, then Russia and central Asia. His intrepid Asian journeys on horseback, defying a media ban by then invading Russians, earned the attentions of another great general, Mikhail Skobelev, who considered shooting him but instead became his close friend.

MacGahan was an impressive man, physically and otherwise. He stood 6 ft 4, and his face was said to resemble the portraits of Jesus then current. But his hero status in Bulgaria arose from an exposé of Ottoman atrocities during a nationalist uprising in 1876, including mass murder of civilians.

It made a deep impression on William Gladstone. It also led to the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8, which gave Gen Skobelev his finest hour but cost MacGahan his life. Days short of

his 34th birthday, he died of scarlet fever at Constantinople. Skobelev is said to have wept at his grave.

I only learned about all this on Monday night, indirectly, while helping launch a new book about James Joyce and chatting to one of the contributors, Helen Solterer, a professor from North Carolina.

The connection is that back in Ireland, in the late 19th century, another branch of the McGahan family was living on a farm near Clones, from which one Elizabeth McGahan moved to Dublin and married a civil servant called Curran.

The name of their son Constantine Peter Curran (1883-1972), hinted at the place wherein Januarius MacGahan ended his days. And when Curran too became a journalist, reporting on Ireland for the radical English newspaper *The Nation*, he took the pen-name "Michael Gahan", another nod to the illustrious-if-distant cousin.

C.P. "Con" Curran was a man of many other parts: lawyer, architectural critic, photographer, collector. He was also a member of Ireland's revolutionary generation, going to school with Eamonn Ceannt, among others.

And although nicknamed "Cautious Con", he risked injury at least once too when, on orders from Michael Collins, entering the bombed-out Four Courts in 1922, wearing waders and tip-toeing around live mines, to investigate the damage to records.

But by his own estimate and with a faint echo of St Helena, one of the key events in Curran's life involved another man on the way to famous exile.

In the St Stephen's Green campus of UCD one day, Curran was attending a lecture on English literature when the professor asked the class if they were familiar with a certain, newly published poem, and then immediately referred the question to the boy most likely: "Have you read it, Mr Joyce?"

Curran would later romanticise the moment he met James Joyce as an epiphany: "A voice behind me replied indifferently: 'Yes.' I looked around and saw my first poet."

He later took a now-famous photograph of the writer, by then a friend, in the Currans' garden.

After Joyce's final departure from Ireland, they corresponded regularly. And they met again in 1920s Paris, by which time Joyce was a much-feted figure there, although in Curran's experience, all he ever wanted to talk about was Dublin.

Curran's memoir *James Joyce Remembered* first appeared in 1967. It has been republished to coincide with the *Ulysses* centenary, but complete with new essays by Diarmaid Ferriter,

Anne Fogarty and others including Prof Solterer. The latter is Curran's grand-daughter. And it's a measure of how extraordinary the extended family's story is that she mentioned the hero of Bulgaria only in passing, after I noted with curiosity that Curran's mother was "from Monaghan".

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