

James Joyce

(1882-1941)



James Joyce is at once Dublin's most local and most international writer. In his novels the city gains a universal identity like Homer's Mediterranean or Biblical Jerusalem, transcendental, yet ruthlessly realistic. Today his name is forever linked with that of Dublin.

Joyce's formative years were spent against a background of constant upheaval. Originally well-to-do, his spendthrift father swept his large family into poverty, moving from lodging to lodging around the city. Joyce's home life stood in stark contrast to the comfort enjoyed by his schoolfriends at Clongowes and Belvedere and his colleagues at University College, and much of his youth was spent roaming the streets. His determination to escape was enhanced by what he saw as the introverted atmosphere of the Irish literary revival, which he denounced in a scurrilous broadsheet, *The Holy Office*, on the eve of his departure for the continent in 1904.



Joyce settled in Trieste with Nora Barnacle, the Galway girl who was to become his wife. Relations with Dublin were further strained when his book of short stories, *Dubliners*, caused a protracted argument between Joyce and his Dublin publisher, George Roberts. On Joyce's final visit to Dublin in 1912 Roberts destroyed the entire first edition and Joyce left the country for ever the next day. Disowned, as he felt, by Ireland, Joyce nevertheless acknowledged his Irishness throughout his exile. In *Dubliners* (published in London in 1914) and his autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) Joyce presented a meticulous warts-and-all picture of Dublin and his own family and social background.

Taking refuge from war-torn Europe in neutral Zurich, Joyce worked on the novel which would revolutionise world literature and make Dublin eternally his own. In *Ulysses* he reconstructed an entire Dublin day in June 1904 and made it the stuff of a modern epic, full of real people, real places, real names and topical allusions. The modern Odysseus, Leopold Bloom, steers his way through a city

which is by turns beguiling, hospitable or oppressive. Although Joyce's candid descriptions of human organs at work caused the book to be banned in Britain and the United States for many years after its publication by the courageous Sylvia Beach in Paris in 1922, *Ulysses* earned him international acclaim.

Joyce, who had moved to Paris in 1920, was based there for nearly twenty years. He became a famous but elusive figure avoiding interviews and public appearances and resolutely maintaining his independence of any movement, political, social or literary, which tried to claim him. Devoted to his immediate family - his wife Nora, his children Giorgio and Lucia, and later Giorgio's wife Helen and their son Stephen - he also brought with him a collection of family portraits, inherited from his father, every time he changed his apartment (at least an annual occurrence).

Surrounded by a select circle of friends, he worked for seventeen years on his last novel, the complex masterpiece *Finnegans Wake*, in which Dublin is once again the centre of the universe and the theatre of all human history. *Finnegans Wake* appeared in May 1939, on the eve of the war and the occupation of France. The Joyces sought refuge in Vichy and finally got permission to return to Zurich in December 1940. A month later Joyce was taken ill, and died of peritonitis on 13th January 1941.

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