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James Joyce

A Biography

GORDON BOWKER



PHOENIX

To Rhoda, who was there
at every step

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

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1
Past Imperfect
(1800–1882)

'The past is not past. It is present here and now.' Joyce, *Exiles*

In a class-conscious society like British Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century, family origin was the main determinant of social status. For John Stanislaus Joyce and his son James, identity was inseparable from family – its historical line and ramifications. The ancestral presence reminded them of who they were and reinforced their sense of social distinction. As James's father began to squander his inheritance and the family descended into poverty, asserting claims to a distinguished ancestry became ever more important to him. Family associations, escutcheons and portraits became more meaningful, and the family legend passed on to his children became increasingly colourful and inventive.

Two ideas were very important to James Joyce – that the Joyce family had distant Scandinavian origins, and that Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, was a paternal ancestor. From his father he inherited portraits of various ghostly forebears, to which he added family portraits of his own. He had a close relationship with his mother and his bond with his father was strong and formative enough for many of the old man's eccentricities to shape his own personality. But he had very little time for his siblings, except Stanislaus, his next-eldest brother, George who died young, and Mabel who suffered the same fate. Consequently for him, as time went by, the past was more immediate than the present, and became the chosen playground of his fiction.

His family had its Irish roots, he claimed, somewhere in the so-called Joyce country of County Galway, in the far west of Ireland, whence, it is said, come *all* Irish Joyces. They had migrated from Normandy to Wales following William's conquest of England, and thence to Galway following Cromwell's conquest of Ireland. For any imagination haunted by ghosts, here was a rich legendary past to inhabit and explore – as Joyce did in *Finnegans Wake*.[1] But his immediate branch of the family, the historically present Joyces, had by the very late eighteenth century gravitated south-

wards to County Cork, 'a southern offshoot of the tribe', or so he claimed.[2]

The Joyces' recorded history originates with a certain George Joyce of Fermoy who begat the author's great-grandfather, James, born in Cork and married to Anne McCann, an Ulsterwoman. Great-Grandfather Joyce, a lime burner by trade, was by repute 'a fierce old fire-eater' and probably a member of the Whiteboys, a secret terrorist group operating in Munster during the 1820s, attacking the larger landed properties and acting to defend tenant farmers. He was said to have been arrested, tried, and barely escaped hanging, living on to establish himself as a successful building contractor.

According to Peter Costello, unlike his strong-willed forebears, the son of James and Anne Joyce, James Augustine Joyce (1827–66), another Corkman, was 'little more than a feckless charmer; a typical man of the third generation only too happy to spend what his father and grandfather had won.'[3] He was a horse-trader and reckless gambler who lost a great deal of money. Perhaps in the hope of stemming his excesses, his family married him off to a woman ten years his senior, Ellen O'Connell, an ex-nun. She was a member of the extensive O'Connell clan which included the great Daniel, MP for Clare and a dominant force in Irish politics during the first half of the nineteenth century. When James Augustine's business eventually failed, his father-in-law, Alderman John O'Connell, secured him a sinecure as Inspector of Hackney Coaches (or 'jingles'), with an office in the City Hall. Here, it has been suggested, is where the idea that the world owed the Joyces a living, which the author's father evidently inherited, first took root.[4]

John Stanislaus Joyce, James's only offspring, was born in Cork city on 4 July 1849. James proved an affable father, but Ellen a sour and censorious mother. Although John was coached by a pious aunt, who later took the veil, he eventually became anticlerical, possibly influenced by his grandfather, old James Joyce, who believed that religion was only for women.

Intent on transforming his son into a gentleman able to move in the highest circles of Irish society, on St Patrick's Day, 1859, John's father entered him at the newly established St Colman's College in Fermoy, but he was to remain under priestly eyes for barely a year. The youngest boy in the college, he was said to have been spoiled, and although not much of a scholar, acquired a ready wit and gained a familiarity with the priesthood which later he came to despise. He began to imbibe ideas of Fenianism from these men of the cloth and other boys at the college, as well as from those of his relatives prominent in Irish politics. Music and singing, a significant part of college life, became a significant part of John's life. He had 'a good treble voice', it was said, and 'sang at concerts at an early age',[5] acquiring a passion for operatic arias and old Irish ballads,

a passion communicated to James, the son who took after him most. Some of his favourite songs, such as 'Blarney Castle', formed part of young James's repertoire, and 'The Last Rose of Summer' became Mina Kennedy's favourite song in the 'Sirens' episode of *Ulysse*s. John's stay at St Colman's was curtailed when he was withdrawn on 19 February 1860, either because his fees were unpaid, or after a severe attack of rheumatic fever rendered almost lethal by typhoid.[6] After that, most likely he completed his education under private tuition.

After St Colman's, John's parents resolved to build him up, and he began a programme of cold baths, exercise, rowing and athletics, which he claimed accounted for his relative longevity. There are allusions to this Spartan lifestyle in James's story 'The Sisters', and in *Ulysses* in Bloom's interest in the exercises of the German strongman, Eugen Sandow.[7] As part of this regime, John's father arranged for him to work aboard a Cork Harbour pilot boat. There he acquired a stomach for sea travel and what his biographers call a 'vocabulary of abuse that for years was the delight of his bar-room cronies',[8] able to draw upon a whole lexicon of inventive expletives. Favourites included 'Shite and onions!', 'I'll make you smell hell!' and, when things went badly for him later, 'Curse your bloody blatant soul . . . Ye dirty pissabed, ye bloody-looking crooked-eyed son of a bitch. Ye dirty bloody corner-boy, you've a mouth like a bloody nigger.'[9] The story of the seaman (D.B. Murphy) encountered by Bloom and Stephen at the cabman's shelter in the 'Eumeus' episode of *Ulysses*, full of hair-raising stories of treacherous foreigners, has the smack of John Stanislaus, the young salt, knocking around Cork Harbour. And the songs of Italian sailors, alluded to in the 'Sirens' episode, must have passed through John's musical memory into the creative imagination of his son.

Later in life he followed the hounds, a love of the chase caught presumably from his father's love of horses. 'Begor, hunting was the game for me,' he told a journalist in old age.[10] This passion is given voice in *Ulysses*, when, in 'Circe', the hunting cries '*Holà*! Hillyho!' and 'Bulblul Burblblburblb! Hai, boy!' echo between Bloom and Stephen amid the surrealistic anarchy of Bella Cohen's whorehouse. And John's habit of regular long walks around Dublin and environs, caught by his children, foreshadows the wandering narrative line which snakes through most of his son's fiction.

Politics was a running theme throughout John's life. As well as the Fenianism imbibed as a schoolboy, two O'Connell uncles became town councillors in Cork, and one of his cousins, Peter Paul McSwiney, became Lord Mayor of Dublin. The 1860s saw the resurgence of a Fenian movement prepared to take up arms to liberate Ireland. Under their leader, James Stephens, they led an abortive uprising in February 1867, resulting

in imprisonment for the rebels. The movement's conspiratorial air appealed to John, and while the extent of his involvement with it is unknown, escaping to university might have saved him from a stint behind bars.

Although he gained entry to Queen's College, Cork, in October 1866, the death of John's father, who was barely forty, delayed his starting there until the following year. He chose to study medicine and found life as a medical student highly congenial – the conviviality, the drinking, the swapping of obscene anecdotes. Cherished memories of those carefree days were passed to his son who fed them into *A Portrait of the Artist*. John is said to have had 'stage presence', and the demands of student life did not prevent him from acting, singing comic songs at college concerts (including the then-popular 'Tim Finnegan's Wake'), and throwing himself into college sports. He was especially keen on field athletics and cricket, a passion his literary son inherited. In the 'Lotus-Eaters' chapter of *Ulysses*, Joyce recalls one celebrated Dublin cricketing hero:

> Heavenly weather really [muses Bloom] ... Cricket weather. Sit around under sunshades. Over after over. Out ... Duck for six wickets. Still Captain Buller broke a window in the Kildare street club with a slog to square leg.[11]

John failed his second-year exams, and returned to college for a further year before leaving without a degree.

In July 1870, at the age of twenty-one, he came into part of his inheritance, including properties in Cork yielding an annual income of some £500 from rents. Almost simultaneously the Franco-Prussian War broke out. It caused a sensation in Cork, with demonstrations and Irish volunteers rushing to the aid of the embattled Catholic French. John decided to join the fray, only to be intercepted in London by his mother and shipped straight back home. She was also alert to any female entanglements she considered unsuitable, and John's affairs were often cut short by maternal intervention. However, he was not deterred. As a young man, according to James, his father was 'a conqueror of women'. This reckless pursuit of the female once led, it seems, to a venereal infection, though his claim to have cured himself of a syphilitic chancre seems exaggerated. The idea that inherited syphilis led to his favourite son's later near-blindness has been argued and discounted, John never having shown any of the advanced symptoms of the disease. Nevertheless, that James may himself have contracted some sexual infection leading to rheumatic and ocular afflictions is not entirely improbable.[12]

Following university, John's life began to progress. After a few years as

an accountant he took a job, for £300 a year and a £500 shareholding, as secretary of a distillery established by Henry Alleyn, a Cork businessman, at Chapelizod (meaning 'the Chapel of Isolde'). This Dublin suburb with legendary associations would capture the imagination of his son, the author, who made it the home of James Duffy in his short story 'A Painful Case', and is the setting of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's 1861 novel, *The House by the Churchyard*, which features in *Finnegans Wake*. Robert Broadbent of Chapelizod, a friend of John's, owned the Mullingar Hotel which became in the novel the home of landlord Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, him of the ambiguously recurrent initials. H.C.E. (Here Comes Everybody; Haveth Childers Everywhere) owed something to Hugh C. E. Childers, Gladstone's Chancellor and Secretary of State for War, an Irish Home Ruler, whom John met at Dublin's United Liberal Club in 1880.[13]

To his various pastimes John now added yachting around the mouth of the River Liffey and into Dublin Bay, and serious opera-going. He delighted in the great singers who visited Dublin during that period. John himself had developed a fine tenor voice, and sang occasionally in concerts at Dublin's Antient Concert Rooms. He was thrilled on being told that he had been declared 'the best tenor in Ireland' by Barton McGuckin, a celebrated singer with the Carl Rosa Opera Company – a story he never tired of repeating to anyone who cared or did not care to listen.

At that time, Dublin musical culture was suffused with a passion for opera. As Joyce told Stuart Gilbert:

> One of the most remarkable features of Dublin life in the heyday of Mr Bloom [and John Joyce] was the boundless enthusiasm of all classes of citizens for music, especially of the vocal and operatic varieties … and their cult of the divo, carried to a degree unknown even in Italy.[14]

The lasting and profound influence of this enthusiasm on James has been well noted, and Peter Costello underlines the point by asking, 'What after all is *Finnegans Wake* but a species of operatic chorus?'[15]

Nor had John lost his penchant for acting, especially when tipsy and telling colourful stories. One which spun itself into *Finnegans Wake* was the Crimean War story of Buckley the Irish soldier, who once had a Russian general in his sights, but, in awe of his uniform and decorations, was unable to fire. Then, reminding himself of his duty, he took aim again, at which moment the general dropped his pants to relieve himself, again prompting the soldier, unable to shoot so vulnerable a target, to lower his gun. However, when the man then proceeded to wipe himself with a piece of turf, Buckley could no longer respect the man and shot

him. How he might use this story did not dawn on Joyce until, in the late twenties, he told it to Samuel Beckett, who commented, 'Another insult to Ireland.' 'Now,' said Joyce delightedly, 'now I can use it.'[16]

At the distillery, fate suddenly took an unfortunate turn. The manager, Alleyn, was misappropriating the firm's funds, and, when challenged by John, disappeared with the spoils. The company later went into liquidation and John lost not just his job but his £500 investment. Alleyn barely survived to enjoy his ill-gotten gains, dying just two years later in January 1880. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, he became Joyce's model for the irritable, curmudgeonly boss in his story 'Counterparts'.

John worked for a time in an accountant's office in Westland Row in central Dublin, and became a familiar figure in various city bars and hostelries where his congeniality, scathing wit and fondness for drinking became legendary. He was something of a dandy, sporting a monocle, a carefully waxed moustache, and sometimes a colourful waistcoat later memorialized in his son's short story 'The Dead' – 'a waistcoat of purple tabinet, with little foxes' heads upon it, lined with brown satin and having round mulberry buttons', made for him by his mother as a birthday present.[17] In keeping with the image, he was also very charming – a 'character' – convivial, amusing, full of 'blarney' with a sharp line in repartee. Asked if he knew anything about the quality of Liffey water, he replied, 'Not a damn bit because I never drank it without whiskey in it.'[18]

Through O'Connell contacts John was appointed secretary of Dublin's United Liberal Club, catering for members of the party which represented the independence-minded rising middle class against the Conservative pro-British Establishment. It was that section of Irish society which produced James Joyce and upon which he would focus his creative intelligence. For John, here was an opportunity to enjoy the social life, the parties and balls at the Mansion House.

At around this time he became romantically involved with nineteen-year-old Mary Jane Murray (known as May), the beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed daughter of John and Margaret Murray (née Flynn) who ran a tavern in what is now Terenure, a suburb in the west of Dublin, and he patronized the distillery. May's father disapproved of the small, handsome but rakish John Joyce pursuing his beautiful daughter (someone dubbed them 'Beauty and the Beast'), and his mother, reproachful as ever, objected to her only son's marrying into the family of a mere innkeeper. But John ignored his mother for once, and his ardent pursuit of May first charmed and finally won the young girl's heart.

Mary Jane was born in the county town of Longford on 15 May 1859, the third child of a Leitrim Murray and a Dublin Flynn. John Murray's family, it was said, included a priest with literary talent; Margaret Theresa

Flynn's family were musical and, claimed Joyce, she and her sisters had studied singing with Michael Balfe, the Dublin composer of *The Bohemian Girl*. May had two older brothers, John and William, who did not get on, a family situation, as Costello points out, replicated in *Finnegans Wake* – a pub landlord, his wife, a beautiful daughter and two quarrelsome brothers. Brother John, a journalist with the *Freeman's Journal*, was forced into marriage when he impregnated the sixteen-year-old daughter of his lodging-house landlady, something John Joyce, who disdained his brother-in-law, never allowed to go unmentioned. John Murray's plight – a young man inveigled into marriage – became the basis for his nephew's story 'The Boarding House'.[19] William, the younger of the brothers, a self-employed cost accountant, married the convent-educated Josephine Giltrap, who became James's favourite aunt. Kind and empathetic though *she* was, William was a martinet who bullied his children, providing James with yet more material for a story – 'Counterparts' – in which a browbeaten clerk in turn browbeats his own son.

May was schooled mostly by the musical Misses Flynn at their finishing school for young ladies at 15 Usher's Island (on the south bank of the Liffey in the heart of Dublin). There she learned deportment, how to dance, play the piano and sing, and, as John also sang, James would grow up in a world of music and song – from Irish ballads to operatic arias. This was the background evoked in 'The Dead', in which the Flynn sisters become the Misses Morkan, who also feature *en passant* in *Ulysses*.[20]

As secretary of the United Liberal Club, John played a key role in helping Maurice Brooks, a Home Ruler, and Robert Lyons, a Liberal, triumph over the Conservatives James Stirling and Sir Arthur Guinness (later Lord Ardilaun, doyen of the Dublin brewing family) in the election of March 1880. Afterwards, so he alleged, he had the pleasure of informing Sir Arthur that he was no longer an MP. It was a triumph for the energetic secretary who liked to boast that he had received 100 guineas for his services from each of the grateful candidates. 'I won that election,' he would claim, and from this success he acquired a reputation for organizing election campaigns which would find him employment in harder and less friendly times. A month after that election, in May 1880, Charles Stewart Parnell became leader of the Home Rule League, of which John was to become an ardent supporter. (Parnell's close associates Michael Davitt and Timothy Healy, also among the Joyce family's heroes, would play a key role both in Irish politics and in the lives of John and his impressionable son James.) As it was, with his reputation riding high, there was talk of John being offered a parliamentary seat. The future looked assured for this young man on the rise.

By the beginning of 1881, as Irish opinion, with Parnell in the vanguard, turned against Gladstone, the United Liberal Club was losing its purpose, the secretaryship was dispensed with and John was looking for a job. He got his break when the post of rate collector at the Collector General's Office in Dublin became vacant. This pensionable Civil Service post (in the gift of the Lord Lieutenant) was worth over £400 per annum (comparable to that of an experienced Irish doctor) – with additions for administering jury lists and checking electoral registers, John's friend Alf Bergan put it at £800.[21] With support from various political contacts, and after having to re-sit the Civil Service entrance examination (failed first time), he was duly offered the post by W. E. Forster, the Chief Secretary for Ireland.

John and May were married on 5 May 1880, ten days short of her twentieth birthday, at Rathmines Church. May afterwards liked to say, 'I was born in May, am known as May and was married in May.' The newly-weds honeymooned in London and Windsor before setting up home at 15 Clanbrassil Street, a few doors from the Murray family home. In *Ulysses*, drawing as ever on his personal past, Joyce made this street the home of Rudolph Virag, father of its wandering anti-hero Bloom, pictured as 'precociously manly, walking on a nipping morning from the old house in Clanbrassil street to the high school, his booksatchel on him bandolierwise, and in it a goodly hunk of wheaten loaf, a mother's thought'.[22]

But living close to his in-laws did not suit John. Like his mother, who, outraged by the marriage, had now cut him out of her life, he thought the Murrays beneath him, and the bad blood between him and that family would persist. He always referred to May's twice-married father as 'the old fornicator', and on hearing William refer to one of his children as 'Daddy's little lump of love', John quickly rendered it into 'Daddy's little lump of dung'. They soon moved to Ontario Drive, Rathmines, just a brisk walk from the United Liberal Club on Dawson Street.

May Joyce, a pious Catholic, would endure seventeen pregnancies from which came thirteen survivors, two of whom died in infancy. The first child, John Augustine Joyce, was born three months prematurely on 23 November 1880 and died after eight weeks. His father, unlike his mother, found little consolation in religion and was known to call Irish bishops and priests 'sons of bitches' – as does Simon Dedalus, his fictional incarnation.[23] But John could forget his troubles in the company of his many congenial friends.

For May, the sad loss of her firstborn was compounded in February 1881 by the death of her mother Margaret (the only Murray John liked), and her life was further disturbed when her restless husband moved twice more within the next twelve months. Less mourned was the death in

June that year of John's mother, Ellen, who had not communicated with him since his marriage.

Coming from a strong male line, the loss of his first son affected John profoundly, and probably explains why he focused almost all his affection and pinned all his hopes on the next son to come along. James ('Jim' to his family) was born at 6 a.m. on Thursday 2 February 1882 at 41 Brighton Square West, in Rathgar. That day, reported London's Meteorological Office, the barometer was falling, south-easterly winds turning to gales were forecast, with fog, dull mists and rain over all Ireland. The outlook, said the report, was gloomy.

The new arrival was baptized three days later by the Rev. John O'Mulloy at St Joseph's Chapel of Ease at Terenure. A distant relative of John, Philip McCann (ship's chandler on Burgh Quay), and his wife Helen were godparents, undertaking to pray for him regularly, set a Christian example, and encourage him in the faith. In the case of the newly christened 'James Augustine Joyce' that would prove a somewhat thankless task.

The date of Joyce's birth coincided with the religious festival of Candlemas and the pagan Groundhog Day, an appropriate birthday for a writer who would combine a religious (if impious) cast of mind with a fascination for myth and legend. He had emerged into a solid, predictable Victorian world dominated and enshrouded by tradition, in a country which stood in the shadow of another, and whose indigenous language and culture had been supplanted. He was not only destined to shake the world of modern letters, but eventually, by taking and subverting the intrusive English language, would help put Ireland firmly on the literary map.