



# One City, One Book

## James Joyce's *Dubliners*

### Joyce's Background

James Augustine Joyce was born in the Victorian suburb of Rathgar, Dublin in 1882 into a large Catholic family. The eldest of ten children, Joyce received a private education at a Jesuit school and later attended University College Dublin in 1898 on a scholarship, studying English Literature and Foreign Languages. Shortly after graduating, Joyce toyed with the idea of studying medicine, while at the same time trying to establish himself in Dublin's literary circles. Moving to Paris in 1902, originally to study medicine, he found a more liberal society in which he felt a freedom to write about his homeland. Joyce would later comment on his writing, saying that he gave the Irish 'one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking glass', a view that many in Ireland would find difficult to acknowledge for many years. 'Dubliners' would not be published until 1914, the year the first World War began, in the midst of great unrest in Ireland.

### *Dubliners*' Background

*Dubliners* is a collection of short stories concerning men, women and children in the working and middle class sections of Victorian Dublin. The dominant themes within the stories include a desire for escape (*An Encounter*), sex and betrayal (*The Dead*), life and death (*Evelyn*), and religion (*The Sisters*).

It would be Irish politics, however, that would be of huge importance within the stories and an acknowledgement of the political backdrop at the time is integral to its cultural significance today. Dublin was at that time considered the second city of the British Empire, yet it was also emerging as

the first city of Irish Nationalism. Joyce makes reference to events outside of his characters' lives which colour the seemingly everyday nature of the stories. In 1913, a year before the book was published, Dublin experienced the Lockout Strikes led by Jim Larkin and James Connolly, over Irish workers' right to unionise. It is considered the most severe and significant industrial dispute in Irish History. In 1916 the Easter Rising would take place, which would prove to be a catalyst for the War of Independence (1919-21). Dublin Castle was the centre of British Rule in Ireland and therefore would be in the background during much of the political rebellion.

The story *Ivy Day in the Committee room* describes a group of men working as street promoters for a mayoral candidate. The men meet to debate politics and complain about late pay cheques. The story is significantly set on Ivy Day, which commemorates the death of the politician Charles Stewart Parnell, considered the nationalist movement's greatest leader. Within the story, there are several references to Dublin Castle and in particular to the growing suspicion of fellow Irish men spying on Irish Nationalists for British government in the State Apartments.

In his most famous story *The Dead* Joyce covers important issues of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish life, as well as the wider themes of life and death. Poverty is referred to through the character of Lily, political divisions are discussed between Miss Ivors and Gabriel, and criticism of the Catholic Church in Ireland through Aunt Kate's criticism of Pope Pius X.

In conclusion *Dubliners* is considered by many critics to be the best collection of short stories of the twentieth century. For those who are new to this collection, it provides a perfect example of how a city can be captured by one book and is therefore an ideal selection for this year's literary celebrations. It captures a period of Irish history when the future was uncertain and the world was changing forever. Through Joyce's writing we achieve an understanding of Dublin and its people as well as an insight into the often turbulent relationship the writer had with Ireland. A quote from the writer best describes his genuine love for the city 'When I die, Dublin will be written in my heart.'

**Useful Websites:**

[www.dublinonecityonebook.ie](http://www.dublinonecityonebook.ie) - [www.dublincityofliterature.ie](http://www.dublincityofliterature.ie)  
[www.nationalgallery.ie/Research/Dubliners](http://www.nationalgallery.ie/Research/Dubliners)  
[www.jamesjoyce.ie](http://www.jamesjoyce.ie)  
[www.dublincastle.ie](http://www.dublincastle.ie)

**References:**

Patrick Yeates, *Dublin Lockout 1913*, History Ireland Magazine, Vol. 9 No. 2  
summer 2001

Don Grifford, Joyce Annotated Notes for Dubliners and Portrait of an Artist,  
University of California Press

James Joyce, *Dubliners* in E.Notes.com



Written by Jennifer Laverty, Dublin Castle, OPW

