

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-55876-1 - James Joyce and the Question of History
James Fairhall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

This study of James Joyce's fiction as a response to Irish and European history exemplifies Fredric Jameson's injunction, "Always historicize!" James Fairhall examines the effects of colonialism, nationalism, and World War I on Joyce's work; and he explores significant absences in his treatment of women, the lower classes, and the Irish countryside. He maintains that Joyce's great problem was his desire to transcend the artist's subject position within history. Joyce responded to the difficulties of being an artist in Ireland by going into self-exile; but in his work he grappled increasingly with the constraints of all history, any history. Drawing on a wide range of critical theories Fairhall argues that Joyce opened up seemingly closed possibilities by destabilizing the boundary between history and fiction, and the notion of an undivided subject.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55876-1 - James Joyce and the Question of History

James Fairhall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

JAMES JOYCE AND THE
QUESTION OF HISTORY

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-55876-1 - James Joyce and the Question of History
James Fairhall
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

JAMES JOYCE AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY

JAMES FAIRHALL
DePaul University, Chicago



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-55876-1 - James Joyce and the Question of History
 James Fairhall
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993
 Reprinted 1995
 First paperback edition 1995

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Fairhall, James
 James Joyce and the question of history / by James Fairhall.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 40292 1

1. Joyce, James, 1882-1941 - Knowledge - History. 2. Literature and history - Ireland - History - 20th century.
 3. Ireland in literature. 4. Historicism. I. Title.

PR 6019.092533375 1993
 823'.912 - dc20 92-37271 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40292 1 hardback
 ISBN 0 521 55876 X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55876-1 - James Joyce and the Question of History

James Fairhall

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Elaine Siegel

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiv
Introduction: What is history?	i
1 The murders in the park	11
2 Literary politics	40
3 The paralyzed city	64
4 Growing into history	112
5 <i>Ulysses</i> and the Great War	161
6 Reforming the wor(1)d	214
7 Afterword: Language and history	248
<i>Notes</i>	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	272
<i>Index</i>	283

Illustrations

(between pages 105 and 112)

- 1 “The Irish Frankenstein,” *Punch*, 20 May 1882 (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)
- 2 “The Sisters,” *The Irish Homestead*, 13 August 1904 (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)
- 3 Contemporary engraving of potato famine of 1846 (courtesy of the Mansell Collection)
- 4 Crowds viewing damage to the General Post Office, Dublin, Easter 1916 (courtesy of the Mansell Collection)
- 5 Proclamation of the Republic, Easter 1916 (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)
- 6 Dublin trams, *circa* 1900 (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Preface

While James Joyce was in the last stages of composing *Ulysses*, he confessed to an impulse to tie a chain around Leopold Bloom and throw him into the River Seine. In the course of writing this study I experienced a similar impulse, and was tempted to fling Joyce, or at least his books, into Long Island Sound. I didn't. But it was a close call.

What kept me going, among other reasons, was a belief not only in the value of a historical approach to Joyce, but in the value of his writings as a catalyst for investigating and interrogating history. What *is* history, anyway? Something that happened in the past, or an account of that thing? How true are historical narratives? How do they differ from fiction? How firm, controllable, and even referential is that common medium of history and fiction, language? Joyce's works – grounded in a dense historical reality, yet at the same time free-floating in a universe of endlessly signifying, interconnected words – provoke such questions.

No single book can examine in depth both Joyce and the nature of history. Thus, rather than attempting any original treatment of history or historiography myself, I draw on the ideas of Hayden White, Fredric Jameson, and other theorists. Against the backdrop of their thoughts I investigate Joyce's handling of history, especially Irish history, and situate him in his own historical moment.

Another way of looking at this book would be to see it as an ideological study. Ideology may be what Joyce called "one of those big words which make us so unhappy" (*CW* 87), yet the word has a broader meaning than that which we are used to hearing on the seven o'clock news. In its broadest sense, which is a neutral one, it means socially derived beliefs and values. In this study I analyze Joyce's ideology, conscious and unconscious, as expressed in his major writings.

History and ideology are two different things, needless to say. Yet we can scarcely analyze one without the other. Ideology actuates the makers of history – the masses of ordinary citizens no less than their leaders (even if they deny the influence of ideology, preferring to think that they are moved by transcendent laws or values). At the same time, ideology grows out of history. It is produced by wars, famines, modes of economic organization, technological advances, and so on.

This brings us to what Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* calls the “nightmare” (*U* 34/2.379) of history. As an Irish Catholic and a European living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Joyce was well aware of the violence of history. He also understood the connection between history and ideology – the fact that, in many respects, history is ideology enacted. The central problem in Joyce’s life, perhaps from the time when he gave up his position as prefect of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Belvedere College, was that of situating himself in relation to history. Inevitably, this entailed situating himself in relation to ideology, or ideologies, as well. In each case he sought a magic circle – that of art – in which he could take refuge from the nightmare and undo its power with a wave of his “lifewand” (*FW* 195.5):

Joyce, in his fiction, attempted to subvert history, which he saw as both a chronicle of violence and oppression, and as a fixed past that had ousted other possible pasts and thus delimited the present. He also attempted to subvert those ideologies which underlie the violence and the oppression. Both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* attack, or rather destabilize, the very basis of modern history – the idea that historical narratives can somehow tell “the truth” about a complex event, can recount what “actually” happened. These books destabilize, too, the linguistic basis of ideology, undermining binary notions such as “race,” “people,” and “nation” which depend on defining something or someone else as the Other.

Joyce’s subtle, brilliant attack on received history offers lessons from which most of us, not just literary specialists, could profit. Imagine a United States whose people understood the ideological nature of history and the historicity of ideology. Certainly such a country would not have stepped unreflectively, with slogans as its justification, into Vietnam or Panama or the Persian Gulf. I mention actual conflicts because Joyce responded in his art to equally real conflicts – the whole chronicle of Irish–English rela-

Preface

xiii

tions, the Boer War, World War I, and the Irish Civil War – and because the stakes involved in establishing an understanding of history and ideology are so high, even after the end of the Cold War.

Yet Joyce made his attack, inevitably, from a position within history. He, like the rest of us, was conditioned by his own history – by his birth in 1882 in Ireland, by his family’s gradually declining position in the Catholic middle classes, by his father’s Parnellism. He rebelled against the ideologies of Irish Catholic nationalism and nineteenth-century European imperialism, but held through his life unexamined opinions (on women, for instance) derived from both. A reformist impulse runs throughout his fiction, from *Dubliners* on, yet the challenges posed to the reader by his writings after *A Portrait of the Artist* drastically restrict the audience on which that impulse could act.

The critic’s task, then, is to analyze not just the success of Joyce’s rebellion against history but its limitations. We must step outside the magic circle of his art and examine its assumptions; we must ask those questions which his art does not acknowledge as questions. In my attempt to do this, I am, I admit, limited by my own position within history (not to mention my position within language, whose limits and lack of limits *Finnegans Wake* underscores). Nevertheless, we must make the effort. If we do not historicize our reading of texts, then how can we achieve an awareness of our own historicity?



This study grew out of a dissertation. I owe special thanks to Michael Sprinker, not only for his invaluable suggestion that I read Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, but for his close readings and other help. Paul Dolan gave me the idea of beginning with the “Eumaeus” episode in *Ulysses*, which in turn led me to the Phoenix Park murders. Karl Bottigheimer welcomed my foray into his own field, history, with advice and encouragement. Though not a reader, David Sheehan aided me, with his usual good-humored efficiency, in other ways. Tom Flanagan steered me toward a broader treatment; the sense of Irish history that pervades his novels is reflected, I’d like to think, in my own work. Kevin Taylor, of Cambridge University Press, advised me well on selecting a title and on other matters. Finally, I must thank Ellen, who always believed in my writing.

Abbreviations

Works by James Joyce

<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Critical Writings of James Joyce</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Dubliners</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Exiles</i>
<i>FW</i>	<i>Finnegans Wake</i>
<i>L I, II, III</i>	<i>Letters of James Joyce, Vols. I, II, and III</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>
<i>SH</i>	<i>Stephen Hero</i>
<i>U</i>	<i>Ulysses</i>

Other abbreviations

<i>JJ</i>	<i>James Joyce</i> (Richard Ellmann)
<i>JJQ</i>	<i>James Joyce Quarterly</i>