

James Joyce and Ireland

For most people on the British mainland, "Ireland" means the ongoing problems of the two warring sides in Northern Ireland. Today, this is part of the United Kingdom and quite distinct from the independent Republic of Ireland to the south of it.

The situation was entirely different when Joyce wrote *A Portrait*. There is no need to study the background in great detail, but you must know enough to understand why politics play such an important part in the book.

At the time in which the story is set, the whole island of Ireland was ruled by the British government in London. It had been occupied by English – later British – troops and settlers since the Middle Ages. The dominant cultural forces were the Anglican Church of Ireland and Anglo-Irish landowners. The latter considered themselves Irish but, in fact, they were part of the ruling class of Great Britain, even though some of them supported the campaign for Irish Home Rule. The social and political attitudes produced by this situation are accurately reflected in *A Portrait*.

Agitation for Home Rule had begun in the early 1800s, soon after the Irish Parliament was abolished. The difficulties caused by Irish nationalism and British reluctance to let go were aggravated by the terrible Irish potato famine of the 1840s.

Later in the nineteenth century, a number of the cultural movements mentioned in *A Portrait* were started up to encourage the Irish to be proud of their native traditions. There were also a few secret underground societies, but no effective rebellion until well into the twentieth century.

In 1920 the Government of Ireland Act led to the establishing of the Irish Free State, now known as the Republic of Ireland. At the same time, six of the nine counties of Ulster – those with a Protestant majority – voted to remain within the United Kingdom. The results of this division actively influence the politics of Ireland today.