

What was Dublin like in the early 20th century?

In 1911 Dublin was the second city of the British Empire, and also the first city of nationalist Ireland. This was a city of genuine diversity. Rich and poor, nationalist and unionist, Catholic, Protestant, Jew and so many more were all bound together in the life of the city.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Protestant ascendancy was turning into an emerging Catholic elite.

1911 and the following years were known as the years in which Dublin changed the most. Many of the local events caused that change such as 1913 Lockout, 1916 Rising and 1919-21 War of Independence. But not all change was driven by local events. Many thousands of Dubliners fought in the trenches of Gallipoli, Flanders and the Somme during World War I.

Dublin Castle, which was constructed in 1204 following the decision of King John, stood at the heart of the city and presented the focal point of British rule in Ireland. That castle as well as government offices which stood in the most prestigious streets of the city defined the colonial nature of Dublin's existence. However, the biggest impact on Dublin's physical appearance had the evolution in transport. While trams, horses and bicycles still dominated transport the private motor car was growing in importance.

Dublin was also a port city, though it could not compare to Belfast, Liverpool or Glasgow. On 1 April 1911 the Titanic was launched from Harland and Wolff Shipyards in Belfast, but no projects of this scale could be undertaken in Dublin. There was no major ship-building industry, no vast industrial sector, no sense of a place driven by the impulses of manufacturing businessmen and their workforce.

In the first decades of the 20th century Dublin produced many amazing writers, and above them all towers James Joyce. By 1911 Joyce was living in exile in Trieste, but no writer has written as brilliantly about a city as Joyce did about Dublin of that era. His collection of short stories, „Dubliners“, published in 1914 but finished almost a decade previously, gives a realistic insight into life in the city. „Ulysses“, his most famous book, also acknowledged by many as the finest novel of the 20th century, is a remarkable journey across a city on an ordinary weekday:

Thursday, 16 June 1904. „I've put so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries“, he says, and while Ulysses certainly offers a lot of material for the scholarly mill, Joyce did not write a book exclusively for scholars. One time when he was with his cousin Kathleen, he asked if her mother had read Ulysses. Kathleen confessed that her mother had found Ulysses unfit to read. Joyces response to that was: “If Ulysses is not fit to read, life is not fit to live“.

Jana Savić 3/2