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James Joyce, *Treeless Hills* and the Night of the Big Wind

Introduction

As is the case with *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners*, *Finnegans Wake* is rooted in Dublin and its environs. Of all of James Joyce's texts, *Finnegans Wake* is the most overtly concerned with the underlying topography rather than the named streets of the city. In the *Wake* Dublin is no longer the man-made and often paralysed labyrinth of Joyce's earlier works, rather it is an animated, mutating landmass, as metamorphic as the river Liffey flowing through it, and the bay around which it bends. This is not the Dublin of a chosen day or night, Joyce has not selected another 16th of June 1904. Instead the book is as broad in its temporal setting as in its spatial reach across the country and westward, over the Atlantic to America. Incidents from early centuries in Ireland which entered folklore occur alongside or on top of events recorded in the 17th century, or rumours from the early 20th century. And the land itself endures the cataclysmic events of its meteorological and environmental past repeatedly. It is not the people alone but the environment which suffers the continuing presence of all past assaults. Joyce references the embedded historical remnants buried in the boglands and soil of Ireland, recognising as Seamus Heaney did, that it is there that our history can be found. But within literature the remains are not moored in the same manner, the storms of the past return to batter the living. The arena of *Finnegans Wake* is a palimpsestic space: instances of significant change in the topography and geography of Ireland repeat again and again, haunting and disrupting what appears to be the present. So as readers we perceive these things happening almost simultaneously.

And so, the great forests of Ireland, long lamented, are continually felled, giant oaks crashing down into the soft bogs. The unprecedented and as yet unrepeated ferocious hurricane which battered the country in 1839, known as the Night of the Big Wind, *Oíche na Gaoithe Móire*, also has a striking presence. Both the falling trees and the big wind become leitmotifs which recur through the text provoking questions concerning the interplay of the environment and cultural memory.

The Felling of the Trees

The fall of the great forests of Ireland provides Joyce with a rich literary trope laden with cultural memory and socio-political resonances, which he utilizes throughout his works and most fully in *Finnegans Wake*. The trope taps into a chain of historical events well-rehearsed by nationalist rhetoric - the arrival of the English in Ireland; colonial exploitation of people and resources; fears concerning fertility and famine; the loss of an indigenous culture – and thus it allies itself well with the Joycean technique of repeated motifs with multiple textual resonances. Joyce's last work both recalls the ancient bardic tradition of lamenting the lost trees, and parodies its use in nationalist discourse by contextualizing and thus de-politicizing this particular deforestation within the cyclical pattern of its repeated natural occurrence.

If *Finnegans Wake* has a tale it concerns the fall of a giant who now lies buried in the landscape of Ireland. 10 “thunderwords” recreate the sound of the lamented event, the giant oaks falling to the earth, each instance resonating with further events and tropes. The fall motif is intricately linked with forests,¹ and becomes an evocation and lament of the tree felling. The “first” fall takes place in a park that is on one level the Phoenix Park in Dublin, a space which is then expanded outwards to include the whole country: it “sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest” (*FW* 3.20-21). On page two we are told what is to be found in

the ground: “The oaks of old now they lie in peat yet elms leap where ashes lay. Phall if you but will, rise you must: and none so soon either shall the pharce for the nunce come to a setdown secular phoenish” (FW 4.14-17).

The “thunderwords” capture the sound of the fall but their collective 1,001 letters, a number of renewal in the book, points to the potential for regrowth. By the end of the book there is just one leaf remaining (a moment of textual self-awareness for this is also, of course, literally the case) but a future dream of reforestation is at hand. Furthermore, the “ashes” or remnants of the forests provide the basis of literary culture, spoils of their felling providing the leaves of paper, the medium on which their tale will be written: a “trifolium libretto, the authordux Book of Lief” (FW 425.20). Upon them will eventually be written the lament for their passing.

Demonstrating Joyce’s interest and knowledge in the area

James Joyce’s interest in the issue of the deforestation of Ireland is in evidence in several of his works. In 1907 the Triestine newspaper *Il Piccola della Sera* published an essay by Joyce entitled “Home Rule Comes of Age” in which the author blames the English for the poor state of Irish land. Joyce notes that politicians and scientists who have investigated the vast central bog of Ireland have concluded that there are “two spectres that sit beside every Irish fireplace, consumption and insanity.” Joyce lays the blame for this sorry state of affairs at the feet of the English who have a moral debt, he claims, “for not having seen to the reforestation of this disease-ridden swamp for over an entire century”, he puts a financial figure on this moral debt of “500 million francs”.

The exploitation of the forests of Ireland had far-reaching consequences. The forest felling removed safe havens for Irish rebels, enabled control of the people, eased the way for the mapping of the land as ordered by Elizabeth I, and provided fuel and timber to build ships for imperial naval conquest (see Mitchell and Ryan 2007, 322). The natural landscape of the country was irrevocably altered; the destruction of the topsoil led in turn, it has been argued,

to an exacerbation of the effect of the famine blight in the mid-nineteenth century. The removal of the trees also became a potent trope in the telling of the story of Ireland, symbolizing the fall of the ancient order, the loss of culture and indigenous knowledge and practices. As their tradition died out the bards of the 16th century employed the motif of the fallen forests to address their own predicament and that of the country. This type of lament is perhaps most famously found in “Caoineadh Cill Chais” or the “Lament for Kilcash:” “Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid? / Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár,” translated by Thomas Kinsella as “Now what will we do for timber, / With the last of the woods laid low?” (Kinsella 1994, 327-8). The results of this deforestation can be seen in the Irish landscape depicted by Spenser by the end of the 16th century. The image of the fallen trees is so potent that even in the latter part of the twentieth century its impacts are felt. When plans were made to cut down the trees in Dublin’s O’Connell Street in 2002, the public response suggested that a revulsion of historic tree-felling is embedded in cultural memory. One of the protestors, sculptor Imogen Stuart, was quoted as saying “These trees are monuments, living witnesses to the liberation of Ireland. How can we destroy them?”

“Cyclops” episode

Joyce includes a discussion on the deforestation of Ireland in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*, and reforestation and irrigation schemes are referred to several times in the book. The felled trees of the “Cyclops” discussion reappear in various aggressive guises over the pages which follow, as the timber basis of colonial power is emphasized in a litany of weapons of the “fighting navy:” “butting match,” “buttend of a gun,” “caning,” “long cane,” “rod,” “beamend,” “batteringram” (*U* 12.1322-1367). These pages show that, from the point of view of the nationalists in the Dublin bar, a clear trajectory of historical narrative exists: from deforestation and the value and importance of the native forests in Irish cultural

memory, to colonial naval gains and all that was lost to Ireland due to colonial exportation (*U* 12.1239-1257), and on to the Irish Famine exacerbated by the ruined, deforested land. This trajectory culminates in that most potent image of the Famine and forced emigration, the coffin ship:[“We have our greater Ireland beyond the sea. They were driven out of house and home in the black ’47. Their mudcabins and their shielings by the roadside were laid low by the battering ram and the Times rubbed its hands and told the whitelivered Saxons there would soon be as few Irish in Ireland as redskins in America. Even the Grand Turk sent us his piastres. But the Sassenach tried to starve the nation at home while the land was full of crops that the British hyenas bought and sold in Rio de Janeiro.] Twenty thousand of them died in the coffinships” (*U* 12.1364-1372).

Year of the Big Wind

Even the men of the Cyclops bar at Little Britain street would be forced to admit that not all tree felling was the fault of the British. In the year preceding a scene of particular sylvan destruction occurred close by in Phoenix Park, an estimated 1000 – 3000 trees were felled in a storm referred to several times in *Ulysses*: “the big wind of last February a year that did havoc the land so pitifully” (*U* 14.481-82).

In “Telemachus” Buck Mulligan suggests that the Englishman Haines should have his book: “Printed by the weird sisters in the year of the big wind. “ a reference to the colophon of the Dun Emer press edition of W.B. Yeats’s *In the Seven Woods* (1903) which states that the book was finished on “the sixteenth day of July in the year of the big wind, 1903.”

The storm of February 1903 is particularly relevant for its temporal and spatial proximity to the events of Bloomsday, and Joyce makes several references to it and in particular its effect

on the Phoenix park, home at the time to the viceroy and his wife, Lady Dudley. “O yes, J.J. O'Molloy said eagerly. Lady Dudley was walking home through the park to see all the trees that were blown down by that cyclone last year and thought she'd buy a view of Dublin.”

In *Finnegans Wake* it is an earlier and far more destructive storm in 1839 which takes on greatest significance. Allusions to the 1839 Night of the Big Wind or *Oíche na Gaoithe Móire* are frequent in *Finnegans Wake* and they allow Joyce to interrogate Irish cultural memory and the manner in which we record our histories.

The Night of the Big Wind/ *Oíche na Gaoithe Móire*

On the 5th January 1839 a quiet Ireland was covered in snow. The following day the country was struck by a storm of such extraordinary destructive power that it became part of folklore and cultural memory. It was noted that Dublin was "visited by a hurricane of unprecedented ferocity." Buildings were destroyed throughout the country, the water was sucked from the canal at Tuam, accounts put the number of trees felled at 100,000. Livestock was wiped out. Several bird species were almost made extinct and it is said, in a pre-echo of what we are told of the great famine half a decade later, that the following year brought a Silent Spring, the loss of birds had been so great. The destruction was such that it changed the land, dragging away topsoil, destroying the ecosystem, the crops and the dwelling places of animals.

The *Dublin Evening Post* summed up the night of the big wind as follows: “Every field, every town, every village in Ireland, have felt its dire effects. The damage, which it has done, is almost beyond calculation. Several hundreds of thousands of trees have been levelled to the ground. More than half a century must elapse, before Ireland, in this regard, presents the appearance she did last summer. The loss of farming stock, of all kinds, has been terrible;

many hundreds of cattle have had to be killed. Many of the most thrifty and industrious husband-men, whose haggards were filled with unthreashed corn on Sunday night, found themselves without a sheaf of grain in the morning. The poor, of course, as being the most numerous, have been the greatest sufferers. Tens of thousands of their wretched cabins have been swept away or unroofed, and many have become a prey to the flames. Trees, ten to twelve miles from the sea, were covered with salt brine. Such was the fury of the storm, that, had it lasted six hours longer, it is not the house that would have been prostrated, but whole streets and towns levelled.”

The Night of the Big Wind entered folklore quickly with tales of fish flung far ashore, seawater running down the chimneys of inland homes, savings kept in thatch roofs lost, fires throughout the land. It was always spoken of with great horror and awe, in particular because there was so little warning and because it occurred at night. Once more the Phoenix Park, that epicentre of *Finnegans Wake*, was the site of great destruction. The elms which lined the central road were destroyed.

Historical Background

Joyce takes this event and turns it into a potent trope retold over and over. The huge wind appears repeatedly in the book, the voice of god, wrecking havoc, altering the landscape and ecology and entering the very language. The first page of *Finnegans Wake* suggests a land disturbed at short notice, things scattered throughout the country, the upturning of pike point and place (*FW* 3.22)

Reasons were of course, sought for this event of such environmental destruction. The people may well have believed that the apocalypse was at hand. Joyce’s own grandmother supposedly told him that thunderstorms were a sign of God’s wrath. Its concurrence with the

feast of the epiphany suggested a religious agency. Joyce's earlier and most famous short story "The Dead" may well takes place on the 6th Jan, feast of the epiphany, although the text is never specific. But Joyce, who enjoyed a coincidence, would have certainly have noted that The Big Wind occurred the day after snow was general all over Ireland. He refers to the night in *Finnegans Wake* by combining the words apocalypse and epiphany: "Wrhps, that wind as if out of norewere! As on the night of the Apophanyes" (*FW* 626.4-5).

Side by side with these Christian beliefs a more pagan idea was still afloat: it was said that this was the night in which the fairies of Ireland departed, or perhaps that they had caused the storm itself.

In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce sets the folklore of the Night of the Big Wind as a fairytale, overlaid with tales of the famous pirate Queen Grace O'Malley or Graniauaile, and in particular her kidnapping of the son of the Earl of Howth. I consider the Granauaile or Prankqueen section of *Finnegans Wake* to combine myth, folklore and history. Temporality and spatiality loosen their tethers as Joyce condenses multiple tales and events in one thrice told fairy tale. When Grace O'Malley arrives three times knocking on the door of the castle at Howth demanding hospitality, she brings with her an enormous storm. There are references to starshootings and hurricanes and "a fork lance of-lightning" (23.31). The landscape of the Hill of Howth is ravished by the historical rains and winds that have fallen upon the whole country.

The pirate queen is the storm itself. Joyce puns on the phrase "the reine of the shee" (*FW* 68.19) which indicates both matriarchal rule, and the rainfall of the Irish fairies. In the manner of a fairytale the motifs are repeated. Each time the pirate queen or prankqueen returns her rain is alluded to "So then she started to rain and to rain", the second time (21.30-31) she rain, rain, rain.... a loud finegale" (22.9-10); and finally "she started raining,

raining (22.17-18). Grainuaile's names ins played on for its stormy sounds: "And there was a wild old grannewail that laurency night of starshootings somewhere in Erio" (11-13). "And there was a brannewail that same sabboath night of falling angles somewhere in Erio" (21.24-26).

In the *Wake* Joyce uses the Night of the Big Wind as the Irish equivalent of the Flood legend, which is an important motif of punishment and redemption. At the end of the prankquean's tale there is a post-diluvian truce, the covenant between god and man: The end of hostilities, vows made, a peace-promising rainbow across the sky. "And that was the first peace of illiterative porthery in all the flamend floody flatuous world." Like the idea of the postdiluvian age, Irish folk memory and history could be divided into before and after the Night of the Big Wind. In order to demonstrate age qualification for the state pension in 1909, people were asked whether they remembered the night; if they could they were entitled to the pension, an instance of personal memory crossing into official historical record.

Conclusion

The final passages of Joyce's "The Dead" can be read as a richly overlaid lament sourcing the cultural memory of the living and the dead of Ireland. The language used to describe the land in these passages is somewhat heightened, but one might also argue that the barren, desolate landscape of the post-Famine West of Ireland is aptly evoked. This is not a pastoral ideal but a land deforested and laid waste to over centuries.ⁱⁱ Gabriel's movement west is an attempt to encounter the past history, written large on the impoverished landscape of the country. As Gabriel's and our view of the geographic map moves spatially, moments of historical trauma are embedded in the language. The "dark central plain" speaks of depopulation, the "Bog of Allen" of the lost richness of the land. The Shannon, that divider of what land was and was

not considered valuable by the colonizer, carries the adjective “mutinous:” in its dark waves are the struggles and the resistances against the oppressor right back to Cromwell. “Barren thorns,” along with the crooked crosses and the little gate, point to the meagre and paltry natural resources left in the country. As in the prose of Cormac McCarthy, there is a barrenness in the use of language here too: the words “dark” and “softly” are used repeatedly, evoking a musical rhythm but also an acknowledgement of natural recurrence, the continual fall of the snow and the inexorability of nature and death.

The “treeless hills,” a description specifically marking absence, resonates with the loss of the great trees of Ireland. This cultural marker is found throughout Joyce’s works, a potent landmine triggered by and triggering cultural memory. The bog oak returned is both a trope signalling an inert nostalgic national identity, and a complex motif encouraging a postcolonial reading of the haunting of cultural memory. Joyce colludes in both the colonial and the nationalist ideologies by using their tools, thus recognizing the complexity of his own cultural memory and that of the people of Ireland, but he does so in a manner which draws attention to itself, calling on readers to question their own assumptions about such cultural artefacts and crutches, and also to recognize the ineluctable draw of their potency.

Joyce’s allusions to the Night of the Big Wind and other events of meteorological note, situates the “treeless hills” in the context of natural destruction and engages with the manner in which we remember such events. While both male characters HCE and Shem are associated with woods, by the end of *Finnegans Wake* it is the female ALP who is merging into a tree: “I’m getting mixed” (*FW* 626.36). The trees have not returned but they are not entirely gone either and are intricately linked with memory: “My leaves have drifted from me. All. But one clings still. I’ll bear it on me. To remind me of. Lff! So soft this morning ours” (*FW* 628.06-08). Indeed ALP has already pointed to signs of regrowth amid the bog: “Only turf, wick dear. Clane turf . . . Look what I found. A lintil pea. And look at here! This

cara weeseed. ... Once it happened, so it may again (*FW* 625.27-29).

ⁱ Because the dense and elusive style of Finnegans Wake precludes definitive interpretation, moments of clarity are noteworthy. The opening of chapter two, in signalling a shift in direction, makes an unusually explicit comment on what came before in chapter one: "to forebare for ever solittle of Iris Trees" (FW 30.01).

ⁱⁱ In Ulysses Joyce demonstrates an awareness of both rural ideals and actual realities. For example, while Father Conmee sees a barge carrying turf and considers it and its boatman "idyllic," going on to reflect on "the providence of the Creator who had made turf to be in bogs whence men might dig it out and bring it to town and hamlet to make fires in the houses of poor people" (U 10.101-7), Bloom, ever the practical man, notices the same and pictures its less fanciful journey: "On the slow weedy waterway he had floated on his raft coastward over Ireland drawn by a haulage rope past beds of reeds, over slime, mudchoked bottles, carrion dogs" (U 6.439-452).