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## The Absent-Minded War: The Boer War in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

### Abstract

The historical event survives in the modernist literary text not as fact or fixity but as a trace, a textual memory that may be refracted through the multiple private perspectives of character, through literary language, and through innovative technologies of narrative form. One such trace in *Ulysses* relates to the Boer War, an historical event whose significance, arguably, becomes more complex the more closely we focus on the processes of its refraction through the three central private consciousnesses of Joyce's book. This war that ended the nineteenth-century and opened the twentieth, finds a suitable home in a novel that itself marked the arrival of the twentieth century in terms of its innovative fictional technology as well as in terms of its recognition of the changing circumstances of public and private life, and the psychology that questions whilst it underpins them. 1

RICHARD BROWN

## The Absent-Minded War: The Boer War in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

The historical event survives in the modernist literary text not as fact or fixity but as a trace, a textual memory that may be refracted through the multiple private perspectives of character, through literary language, and through innovative technologies of narrative form. One such trace in *Ulysses* relates to the Boer War, an historical event whose significance, arguably, becomes more complex the more closely we focus on the processes of its refraction through the three central private consciousnesses of Joyce's book. This war that ended the nineteenth-century and opened the twentieth, finds a suitable home in a novel that itself marked the arrival of the twentieth century in terms of its innovative fictional technology as well as in terms of its recognition of the changing circumstances of public and private life, and the psychology that questions whilst it underpins them.<sup>1</sup>

Joyce asserts his modernity and frequently also his comedy by situating his characters on the margins of history and between, beyond and across ideological fixities and oversimplifications. Typically, his characters are shown in accidental proximity to public events (rather than in active or central engagement with them), or else in moments of resistance to the interpellations of public demand from wherever these may come.<sup>2</sup> Though it deals with civilian urban life, *Ulysses* (1922) may perhaps be read as a kind of war-time text in that its reconstruction of this comedy of everyday private circumstances was made during and immediately after the time when the industrialized human wastage of the First World War was in full flow. However, since he was engaged in the construction of a historical retrospect from the 1910s and 1920s to the significantly earlier time of 1904, that particular war-time context was not available for direct representation in the book. Instead, Joyce inserted a cluster of cultural memories of the Boer War of 1899-1902, which would, of course, have been Britain's most recent military conflict at the time.

The presence of such material in *Ulysses* offers the promise of a historicized reading, and yet it is one that may be no less available to us in terms of the postmodern and deconstructive critiques of history. The material relating to the Boer War may locate the characters and the book itself in terms of the various received historical narratives of Britain, Ireland and the Empire at the turn of the new century, but it should also serve as a

warning against aggressive or demanding political assumptions, providing as it does an exemplary instance of the way in which Joyce's modernist narrative technology works to reconfigure the relations of history and memory in the psychology of men and women in the modern world. Inevitably coloured by its Irish setting, the Boer War of *Ulysses* has profound significance for its modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Leopold Bloom's reference to the Boer War as 'the absentminded war', which is made during the surreal night-time 'Circe' episode of the book, seems especially appropriate here. The phrase may remind us that the war was, in a sense, geographically absent, from Britain and indeed from the Europe of the colonists who fought in it. It also, as I shall show, draws on a cluster of associations with a well-known poem by Kipling, whose work did much to present this absent war to the popular British consciousness of the time and which, in *Ulysses*, forms an interesting point of linkage between the thoughts of Stephen Dedalus and those of Molly Bloom. The phrase also, more generally, demonstrates Joyce's strategy of representing history through the fragments of personal memory, that are not always, of course, consistent or reliable as record. Joyce's miniature study of this war reveals important contrastive aspects of his two central male characters, yet it seems especially appropriate that it is Molly Bloom, Joyce's twentieth-century woman, who has the final words on the war in the book, and that the play of domestic and gender relations everywhere conditions the portrayal of military conflict, bringing the often-exaggerated demands of the one sphere of human activity into question by juxtaposing them with those of the other.

The first reference to the Boer War in *Ulysses* occurs in a single paragraph in the 'Lotus Eaters' episode (*U*5.65-75) when Leopold Bloom calls in to the Westland Row Post Office to pick up a flirtatious letter from his secret correspondent, Martha Clifford.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the postmistress gets the letter, Bloom sees a recruiting poster in which various regimental uniforms are shown and he experiences a cluster of memories concerning 'old Tweedy', his father-in-law (apparently the closest of his relatives who has direct experience of military service), as well as the contemporary radical nationalist activities of Maud Gonne and Arthur Griffith, of which Bloom is evidently also aware. These memories and associations seem designed to present Bloom as a complex and ambivalent figure in terms of his own political loyalties, inevitably connected both to the world of the Empire and to the local concerns of nationalism. Consequently he is seen to offer a personal and comic realist posture irreducible to the binary terms of either of these two parties or, for that matter, to those of the two principal parties (British and Boer) in the war in question.

Many readers of this passage may find the real history of war displaced in favour of a comic play of gender roles and Bloomian frailties. Joyce notes the minutiae of Bloom's body language as he hints at a masculine military swagger, twirling the 'baton' of his rolled-up newspaper, and 'reviewing again the officers on parade', like some latter-day Kitchener or Roberts. The

presentation of Martha's dominant behaviour as sexual flirtatiousness may partly explain the association with military authority, and an implied connection with Molly's imagined disapproval of his thoughts and actions may be behind Bloom's thoughts of her father.

However, the mention of such a resonant historical figure as Maud Gonne invites us to explore this aspect of Bloom's thoughts further. Maud Gonne, feminist as well as nationalist, had campaigned against the Boer War (in which her future husband and Yeats's rival Major John MacBride had fought against the British army). MacBride doesn't appear in *Ulysses* (as he does in Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916'), though Joyce was obviously aware of Gonne, her political interests and her love life, as the allusion to her in connection with another of her partners, Lucien Millevoeye, in 'Proteus' (*U* 3.233) confirms. Gonne was also the author of a pamphlet, *The Daughters of Ireland*, that argued, at the time, against new rules that had relaxed the laws confining troops to barracks in Dublin at night. According to this pamphlet, the new rules promoted sexual immorality by allowing the troops to consort with local Dublin girls, but Gonne's political position on the war was, arguably, more significant to her than any prudish moral stance, and her pamphlet was variously thought to have been designed to undermine recruitment.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the situation that it addresses was important for Joyce as it provides an aspect of the setting of the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses*, and, as we later learn, the background to an important incident in the life of Molly Bloom.

The nature of Bloom's connection to this aspect of Maud Gonne's political activism is shown in the 'Lestrygonians' episode, where we learn that he himself has, apparently somewhat inadvertently, been involved in Gonne's demonstration outside Trinity College in December 1899, against the awarding of a degree to Joseph Chamberlain (leader of the Unionist Liberals who were, at that time, united with the Conservatives in government) (*U* 8.423). Bloom recalls the chants that were voiced as part of this demonstration, in favour of the Boer leader De Wet, and we learn that he narrowly escaped injury from the mounted police. 'Lucky I had the presence of mind to dive into Manning's or I was souped', he thinks, whereas his friend Jack Power 'did come a wallop, by George' (*U* 8.425-6). The incident, like the one he recalls of helping Parnell with his fallen hat, deftly places him on the comic margins of received history at a time of tragically strong nationalist feeling, though not defining him within the terms of any one side in any polarizing conflict.

In a later moment in 'Circe' he makes an equally strong, or else equally confused and ambivalent, claim to loyalism, presenting himself as having actually fought on the British side in South Africa ('I fought with the colours for king and country in the absentminded war under General Gough in the park and was disabled at Spion Kop and Bloemfontein', *U* 15.793-5, and 'on this day twenty-five years ago we overcame the hereditary enemy at Ladysmith', *U* 15.1525). He also boasts the loyal actions of his wife's father

in the conflict with the Zulus that (unlike the siege of Ladysmith that was raised in February 1900) had indeed predated 1904 by some twenty-five years in 1879.

My wife, I am the daughter of a most distinguished commander, a gallant upstanding gentleman, what do you call him, Majorgeneral Brian Tweedy, one of Britain's fighting men who helped to win our battles. Got his majority for the heroic defence of Rorke's Drift. (U15.777-81)

Tweedy, almost a parody of the style of military dress and behaviours of the Boer War period, is one of the most delightfully elusive figures in the book. He has previously appeared in 'Cyclops' (U4.63-5, 87), where we hear of his prowess as a stamp collector, and that he has 'risen from the ranks at Plevna'. In 'Penelope' Molly's memory confirms that these were indeed the battles in which he claims to have involved, but we can't easily accept this at face value. The British army closely observed but was not directly involved on the ground at the siege of Plevna (a battle in Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish war in 1877) and, as Don Gifford reminds us, no Tweedy was among the 30 survivors of the siege at Rorke's Drift. His claims may, in fact, be no more substantial than Bloom's.

Great claims for the historical significance of the Boer War, especially to the question of Empire, are made by one character in *Ulysses*, when, in 'Eumaeus', the cabman Skin-the-Goat refers to it as having been 'the beginning of the end' (U 16.1002). But we can sometimes learn a good deal by following the smallest traces of memory in the text rather than the grand statements. Bloom, for instance, more typically, recalls on a few occasions an old schoolfriend with a Welsh-sounding name, called Percy Apjohn. In one of these recollections he is described as having been 'killed in action' at the Modder River (U 17.1751), the site of a key battle during the war in Natal. Apjohn is subtly mourned by Bloom during the day, forming another relevant part of the play of absence and presence in Bloom's mind.

Both of the more overtly political strains of Bloom's memory – those that react to the ideological pressures of nationalism and also of imperialism – may be said to remind us that the nature of Joyce's politics and history are almost always lost on readers who lack a sense of humour. In *Ulysses*, contingency impacts on historical memory to produce a narrative worthy of the figure of Uncle Toby in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or that of Falstaff in Shakespearean history, where the personal and the political are inevitably interconnected.

In fact, this aspect of the book also drew on Joyce's own experiences as a young man of 18, when his own eminently Falstaffian father John Stanislaus Joyce is reported to have revealed his pro-Boer sympathies in an argument on a train trip to London that they made together in the summer of 1900 at around the time of the popular celebrations that greeted the relief of the siege of Mafeking.<sup>6</sup> In the portrayal of this period in *Ulysses*, Stephen's father is represented as being barely capable even of such unguarded

political sympathies. Stephen himself, on the other hand, during the discussions of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in the library episode, does demonstrate some of the ambivalences about Empire that were a feature of contemporary dissident discussions of the Boer War, especially in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> In a French version of the play seen by Mallarmé, Hamlet has been called '*Le Distrain*', and Stephen jokingly translates this as 'the absentminded beggar', a phrase which instantly recalls to him a very hurried and elliptical sequence of associations that depend upon the reader knowing that Rudyard Kipling wrote the Boer War poem entitled 'The Absent-Minded Beggar'. According to this train of Stephen's thoughts, Britain's military strength shows more in common with the Hamlet of Act Five than with his hesitating character during the rest of the play. At least according to Stephen's accusation, the patriotic poem that Swinburne wrote about the war in 1901, 'On the Death of Colonel Benson' (Benson died in a Boer Camp), may be seen as defending the concentration camps that the British army introduced to house Boer prisoners during the war.

Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot. The bloodboltered shambles in act five is a forecast of the concentration camp sung by Mr Swinburne. (U9.133-5)

Kipling's poem, which may indeed invoke some subtle echo of Shakespeare's Hamlet's madness, more centrally invites the reader to take sympathy for a fallible modern Tommy Atkins type of soldier who is 'absent-minded' in the sense that he has 'heard his country's call' whilst neglecting what Kipling presents as a range of ordinary domestic obligations whether these be to 'the girls he married secret', who struggle to cope with the 'gas and coals and vittels, and the house-rent falling due', or else to 'the families by thousands, far too proud to beg or speak'. Kipling invites the reader to be able to say to the soldier when he returns:

That, while he saved the Empire, his employer saved his place,  
And his mates (that's you and me) looked out for *her*.  
He's an absent-minded beggar and he may forget it all,  
But we do not want his kiddies to remind him  
That we sent 'em to the workhouse while their daddy hammered Paul,  
So we'll help the homes that Tommy left behind him!<sup>8</sup>

The poem was set to music by Arthur Sullivan, and was apparently popular and successful enough to have raised some quarter of a million pounds for the cause it supported, so it is not, perhaps, surprising to see that it recurs in *Ulysses*, where the realistic personal perspective is put against the impersonal demands of the political in so many ways. The poem exemplifies a structure of feeling that is deeply characteristic of this moment in history. Joyce's Bloom, we may remember, during the afternoon of the day of 16 June, makes an ethical gesture that is in many ways comparable, by 'looking out' for the absent Dignam's widow.

During the third section of the next episode, Molly Bloom makes the

briefest of appearances. We see her in the act of giving a charitable donation to a 'onelegged sailor' who passes by her window in Eccles Street, singing lines from a patriotic song called 'The Death of Nelson'. Molly's spontaneous act of generosity to the beggar seems to contrast with the action of Father Conmee earlier in the episode who passes a beggar by. She doesn't seem to question (as some readers might do in an episode deliberately full of 'reader traps') whether the beggar actually has been, or else merely wishes to present himself as having been, injured in the defence of his country (*U*10.251-3).

Though there seems no especial need to connect this present beggar to the absent one in Kipling's song at this point, evidence for tracing Molly's generosity directly to Kipling does appear as she reveals more of herself to us during the 'Penelope' episode. In fact, Joyce makes the very song whose title Stephen has remembered, into a part of Molly's light operatic singing repertoire, apparently to make a very different kind of political point to the one that is suggested by Stephen. During 'Penelope' we learn much more of Molly's past and upbringing in the military garrison of Gibraltar for the first fifteen years of her life. She is herself, arguably, the child of one such 'absent-minded beggar' and is apparently a loyal supporter of the British army long after her move to Dublin and, as we gradually become aware, she can herself personally be quite fond of soldiers. She has, though, through singing this favourite song, got herself into trouble with the pro-catholic and pro-nationalist group who are putting on concerts in Dublin. Indeed she feels that she has been denied a voice, passed over in favour of her rival Kathleen Kearney, the same girl whose singing career is boosted by her manipulative mother in the story 'A Mother' from *Dubliners*, and who is now apparently the more 'politically correct' choice of the moment. Molly recalls the:

little chits of missies they have now singing Kathleen Kearney and her like on account of father being in the army and my singing the absentminded beggar and wearing a brooch for Lord Roberts when I had the map of it all and Poldy not Irish enough. (*U*18.375-9)

Evidently, both she, as an immigrant to Dublin, and Leopold, the victim of anti-semitic feelings, have been through a process of acculturation into nationalistic aspects of Dublin's local politics that have taken Bloom into some connection with Arthur Griffith (of which Molly apparently disapproves, *U*18.383-6), and which she sees as connected to the success as a singer that she is achieving apparently through her association with the politically treacherous figure of Blazes Boylan. Molly has not necessarily been an especially enthusiastic convert to this aspect of Dublin life. Her dislike of Kathleen Kearney and 'sparrowfarts skitting around talking about politics they know as much about as my backside', is reiterated later in the episode (*U* 18.879-80). It also seems worth noting that Molly is still apparently wearing her brooch for Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief of



the British forces in the Boer War, in 1903, that is, three years after his occupation of Pretoria and a year after the Peace of Vereeniging that brought hostilities to a close ('its over a year ago when was it' *U* 18.616). Meanwhile, Roberts was enough of a popular hero in the Dublin of *Ulysses* for 'darling little Bobsy', one of the Purefoy children listed in the 'Oxen of the Sun' episode, to have been named in his honour (*U* 14.1331-2).

The Boer War has, though, made its most significant impact on Molly's thinking in another connection, since, far from obeying Maud Gonnet's prescriptions for female behaviour, she has, at or around the age of 29, enjoyed what seems to have been the most emotionally intense and in some ways even the most passionately sexual of her extra-marital flings ('so hot as I never felt', *U* 18.393) with the 'so English' soldier Lieutenant Stanley Gardner (*U* 18.889-90), on the eve of this war from which he has never returned. Though married to Bloom for some ten or eleven years, Molly has evidently to some extent initiated this close sexual contact with Gardner (*U* 18.313), and even passed on the Claddagh ring she had been given by her former lover, Mulvey, to him as a love token (*U* 18.866). We learn, amongst other things, that Gardner has been a great kisser (*U* 18.332, 391-4), and an intense admirer of her singing (*U* 18.888-9).

Such passionate memories of Gardner prompt her outburst against 'oom Paul and the rest of the other old Krugers' (*U* 18.394-5), and also against nationalism ('I hate the mention of their politics', *U* 18.387-8), but above all against the failure to negotiate peace in preference to war whose human cost is apparently too great for her to feel it to be justified ('they could have made their peace in the beginning ... instead of dragging on for years killing any finelooking men there were', *U* 18.394-6).

According to a recent essay by Carol Schloss, Molly's current choice of partner in Boylan represents the betrayal of her 'union' with Bloom and therefore carries a symbolic political message in its analogy with the movement of national feeling against the Union with Britain.<sup>9</sup> However, to read Molly in this interpretative way may be to fail to be properly attentive to what she actually says. Her view of the tragedy of Gardner's sacrifice in the war (albeit a death from fever rather than in combat, which perhaps recalls the deaths of such romantic war heroes as Byron and Rupert Brooke), is strongly contrasted with the shabbiness of the actions in the same war of Boylan's father, who has apparently made money from dubious horsetrading deals of which she and others in Dublin are aware.

Molly's position on the Boer War, then, somewhat contrasts with Stephen's in terms of the politics of their respective readings of Kipling. The passionate closeness of her involvement with Gardner and sense of loss might be comparable to Bloom's subtler mourning of Apjohn. It also contrasts both with Bloom's fraudulent claims to have been involved on the British side, and his equally marginal and comic brush with Maud Gonnet. There may also be found here some suggestive points of contact between Joyce's work and that of his illustrious predecessor and supporter W.B.

Yeats. In Molly's lover, Blazes Boylan, Joyce creates a character who is, in some ways, comparable to the MacBride who appears as a 'drunken, vainglorious lout' in Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916'. Joyce's picture of Maud Gonne as a Boer War radical activist may also contrast with Yeats's picture of her whilst his Molly Bloom figure makes a contrast with the Maud Gonne figure both as she appears in *Ulysses* and as she was represented in the work of the older poet. The one may be seen as placing passionate heterosexual and even adulterous love relationships above the claims of political allegiance or expediency; whereas the other is shown (at least by the jilted Yeats) as having tragically sacrificed her love relationship for politics.

Whether or not Joyce intentionally built such contrasts with the elder writer into his portrayal of Molly, he introduces a trace of representative detail that invokes the historical Maud Gonne and, by implication, points a contrast between Gonne's coercive programme of constraining women's sexuality by curfew, and Molly's practice of obeying her heart irrespective of the politically-motivated constraints designed to prevent her. Joyce does not make his Molly a 'political' woman, in the sense that she is the theatrical martyr to a political agenda (according to the manner in which Maud Gonne appeared to Yeats), yet he puts her in a political position nonetheless and he makes her alive to the political nuances of her actions. Attitudes to Irish independence, but also to the relations between love and war, put Molly and Maud on opposing sides of the Boer War.

These aspects of Joyce's representation of the Boer War in *Ulysses* may owe much to the Irish setting of his novel and to discussions of Ireland's political status that often form a backdrop to his writing. In *Ulysses* we barely glimpse an African perspective on the war that, with the benefit of our hindsight, might seem much more significant than it did in Britain at the time. A wider range of African allusion (and further punning play on the events of the Boer War) does not appear in his work until *Finnegans Wake*. Yet Joyce's terms of reference in *Ulysses* seem especially significant given the wider disillusionment with military conflict that began to surface in the cultural sphere in the aftermath of the First World War, which was underlined by the increasing awareness of individual psychology, and of domestic and gender issues at the time.

The strict discipline of the historical setting to which he subjected himself in the writing of *Ulysses*, ensured that Joyce worked out these issues in terms of a dense, detailed, and ultimately very tangled trace of memories of the Boer War whose impact is, of course, above all designed to be comically realistic though serious in its implications nonetheless. No single image of the war emerges from *Ulysses*, so much as a loose series of personal memories and associations that throw important light on characters and their interactions, despite or because of their marginal and contingent positions in relation both to ideologies and to events. In his construction of such historico-comical tracery, Joyce, perhaps most valuably of all, leaves us in *Ulysses* with an example of the tangled trace of history. This we increasingly

perceive in our time to be neither the ground of secure facts, nor of a single linear narrative, nor even of a stable binary polarity, but rather a network of connections that, as we attempt to iterate them, may reinvoke the history of an 'absent' war as it was perceived at the time.

## NOTES

1. The argument draws in various places on notions of the textual 'trace' in the writing of Jacques Derrida, as, for example, in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 216, and 'Signature, Event, Context', in *Margins of Philosophy* (London: Harvester, 1982), pp. 313-4, and in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 63-4 and 281. Reading this material in Joyce's text may serve to show his work as an especially appropriate exemplary instance of this 'trace' that a strictly Derridean approach would find characteristic of all textuality or of textuality itself.
2. See, for example, the Althusserian reading by Mark A. Wollaeger, 'Reading *Ulysses*: Agency, Ideology and the Novel', in *Joyce and the Subject of History*, eds. Mark A. Wollaeger et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 99-100.
3. For many readers of Joyce a first reference point for relevant contextual glossing material will be Don Gifford, *Annotations to 'Ulysses'* (California: University of California Press, 1989), though this should, of course, be supplemented with independent reading in the historical literature. There is a useful review of some of the complex Boer War references in John Henry Raleigh, *The Chronicle of Leopold and Molly Bloom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 173-182. See also Vincent Cheng, *Joyce, Race and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 4, 'Imagining Nations', pp. 224-234.
4. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996). All further references are to this edition in standard episode and line number format.
5. For an account of the roles of Maud Gonne, Yeats and MacBride, see Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 226-230, 239-240, 284-6, etc. See also Keith Jeffrey, 'The Irish Military Tradition and the British Empire', in *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Keith Jeffrey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 94-122. For material on Maud Gonne, see pp. 95-6, and for the impact of nationalist feeling on recruitment figures, see p. 97.
6. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 77. See also the accounts in John Wyse Jackson and Peter Costello, *John Stanislaus Joyce* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), pp. 222-4, and Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper* (London: Faber, 1958), pp. 109-110. According to Ellmann, the figure of Tweedy (and therefore presumably also some of the personal character of these Boer War memories) can be connected to a 'Major' Powell (actually a retired Sergeant-Major) who Joyce's father knew in Dublin (p. 46n.).
7. See glosses in *Ulysses Annotated*, p. 202, and *Joyce, Race and Empire*, pp. 213-4.
8. Rudyard Kipling, *Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), pp. 459-60.
9. Carol Schloss, 'Molly's Resistance to Union: Marriage and Colonialism in Dublin, 1904', in *Molly Blooms: A Polylogue on 'Penelope' and Cultural Studies*, ed. Richard Pearce (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 105-118.