

THE GUNS OF EASTER

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GERARD WHELAN

Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading *The Guns of Easter* with your class should be a worthwhile team-building experience. The guided activities meet curricular needs and are designed to stimulate reading, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, summarisation, imagination and empathy, and to hone oral and written expression. This novel has been selected for use in the senior classes of primary schools and in the junior cycle of secondary schools because it deals in a thought-provoking manner with the following themes:

- Childhood memories
- Family relationships
- Conflict
- Experiences of death, loss and love
- Urban life
- Social inequalities

The central character, Jimmy Conway, develops and changes throughout the novel and learns to view situations and personalities with new eyes.

SUMMARY

In *The Guns of Easter*, Jimmy Conway, a sick and poverty-stricken young Dublin boy, traverses the city against the backdrop of the 1916 Rising. In his attempt to find food for his family, Jimmy puts his own life in danger but eventually makes it home, older and much wiser. This novel should appeal to both boys and girls. You may feel confident that the historical detail in the novel – which deals with social and economic conditions in Dublin in

the early part of this century, and the First World War – has been painstakingly researched. It has achieved critical acclaim, winning the Eilís Dillon Award (1997) and a Merit Award in the CBI/BISTO Book of the Year (1997).

APPROACH The book is divided into four parts: A Boy and his City, The City Surprised, The City at War and The Long Journey Home. This lends itself to exploring the novel in four units with activities and discussion points listed at the end of each unit. The pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may be appropriate to read one chapter a day, or it may suit to read longer sections.

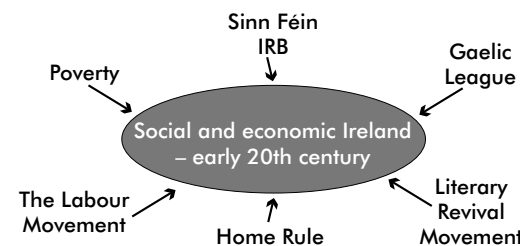
PRELIMINARY WORK

- Read the book yourself in advance. In preparation for the activities, plot Jimmy's family tree and record both his itineraries through the city.
- With the pupils, study the appropriate chapters in their history textbooks.
- Visit the Pearse Museum at St Enda's Park, Grange Road, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16. Visit www.heritageireland.ie/en/HistoricSites/DublinArea/PearseMuseumDublin for more information
- Visit the 1916 Room in the National Museum, Kildare St, Dublin 2. Phone 01 6777444 or visit www.museum.ie. There is no admission charge.
- Examine local churches and cemeteries for commemorations or graves of soldiers who died in the First

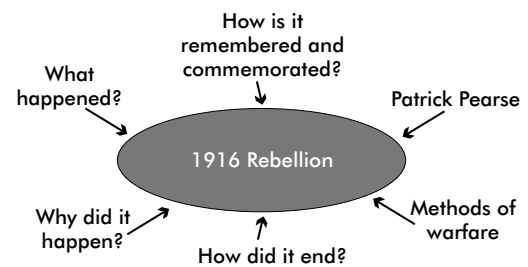
World War (1914–18).

- Visit the War Memorial Gardens, Islandbridge, Dublin, or contact the Secretary, War Memorial Building, 9–13 Waring Street, Belfast, to arrange a guided tour.
- Possibly using the Internet, research local resources and initiate group project work on the three main themes:

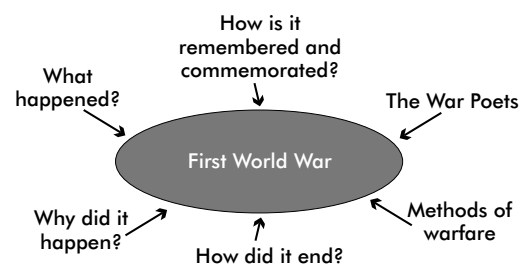
Social and economic conditions



1916 Rebellion



First World War



UNIT 1 A BOY AND HIS CITY

SUMMARY

It is Dublin, 1916. Jimmy (12), Josie (10) and Sarah (6) live in poverty with their mother, Lily Conway. Their father has joined the British Army. Lily's sister, Ella, appears to be in some difficulties. Their brother, Mick, is a member of the Citizens' Army. There is a shocking incident with the ageing Home Defence Force (Gorgeous Wrecks). Everyone is surprised when a prominent rebel joins the British Army. Jimmy is delighted at the prospect of a trip to the races on Easter Monday.

Read pp.7–48.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Does such poverty still exist?
- Why were Irish people serving in the British Army?
- What is Ella's problem?
- Who is your favourite character?
- 'Dreams make bad dinners' (p.14). What did Ma mean by this statement? Discuss her outlook and compare it with that of her brother.
- Mr Meyer told Ma that he had 'learned only one great lesson' (p.35). Discuss the attitudes and prejudices which led him to learn this lesson, and any possible relevance such prejudices might have today.

ACTIVITIES

1. NEWSPAPER REPORT

Pupils read pp.8–10, then produce a short, tightly written article on living conditions in Dublin at the time. They should add a suitable headline.

Decide which paper they are writing for – explore notions of bias and prejudice in reportage.

2. LETTER WRITING

Remind pupils of correct layout for personal letter. The purpose of the letter

they are to write is to keep James Conway up to date on family news. It could be from a friend of Jimmy's.

The writer may choose to comment positively or negatively to James on his 'career move' to the British Army.

3. CHARACTER SKETCH

Take a separate page for each of these four characters: Lily, Jimmy, Mick and Ella.

Write their name and draw their picture in the centre of the page.

Draw an artistic frame around each picture.

Brainstorm appropriate adjectives, with evidence from the text, to describe each character.

Write in the adjectives around each frame.

4. THE THINKING GAME

Read pp.31–32 in which we learn how Jimmy uses the old clock on the mantelpiece to play a thinking game. Focus on some familiar object and give an oral report of your thoughts to the class.

5. QUIZ

Pupils, in teams or individually, identify the speaker in each of the following 20 quotations.

Well? Do you want to go or not?
[MICK]

You never mind that sulky young fellow.
[LILY/MA]

Is that what Da is doing? Is he going out there expecting to die too?
[JIMMY]

I don't know any more what's wrong or right, Jimmy.
[MICK]

Paddy Doyle is after joining up.
[MICK]

What's he staring like that for? Is he sick?
[ELLA]

Excuse me, my Jimmy didn't follow anyone.
[LILY/MA]

I never liked that name. Some of them poor old men saw a lot of hardship.
[LILY/MA]

I'm a marked man since the strike.

[JAMES/DA]

What'll I do, Lily? He has no right ...

[ELLA]

Was that our dear sister I saw going down the steps?

[MICK]

I have learned only one great lesson in my life: people are crazy.

[MR MEYER]

Janey Mack! Is that the time? I'm late!

[JAMES/DA]

If you think you'll be up to the journey, we'll be leaving on Saturday evening and we won't be back maybe till Tuesday.

[MICK]

Howya, Lil? And how are my dear nieces?

[MICK]

Are there any good causes? Ones worth dying for?

[JIMMY]

I lost my temper earlier on. Your Ma does that to me sometimes.

[MICK]

I have lived now for sixty-five years. I have lived in six countries.

[MR MEYER]

I suppose it's yours by law. I should have sold it to you when I had the chance.

[LILY/MA]

Let me think. It's a pity more men wouldn't try it now and then.

[LILY/MA]

God bless that child. God bless that child and the parents that raised him.

[MRS DOYLE]

An analysis of context and motive might lead to interesting discussion. Pupils may like to devise their own quizzes along the same lines.

6. FAMILY TREE

Draft and complete a family tree which shows the relationships between:

Lily Healy, Jimmy Conway, Mick Healy, Ella Healy, James Conway, Sarah Conway, Charlie Fox, Josie Conway.

UNIT 2 THE CITY SURPRISED

SUMMARY

Jimmy is devastated when the trip to the races is cancelled ... until he discovers why. Connolly and Pearse take the GPO. Sarah catches fever. There is no separation allowance as the GPO is in the hands of the rebels. Money from Mick doesn't arrive. Jimmy goes out to find Mick. The Volunteers have declared Ireland a Republic. There is looting in Sackville Street. Jimmy, in desperation, steals food. Jimmy resolves to cross the city to seek help from Ella.

Read pp.49–90.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Did Mick purposely mislead Jimmy?
- Is it always wrong to steal?
- What did Ella do with the money?
- Is Jimmy wise to attempt to cross the war-torn city?
- Jimmy thought that the three men leading the procession were in some way 'set apart...as if they were walking in a world of their own' (p.53). Discuss the idealism of these men and contrast with the cynicism expressed by the man in the bowler hat and by the other onlookers (p.56).
- What caused 'the hungry horde of Dublin's poor' (p.80) to steal objects such as golf clubs and binoculars which would be of little use to them in their daily lives? Should they have stolen foodstuffs instead?
- Discuss the attitude of the young Volunteer who cried with disappointment because the crowds 'were not living up to his ideals' (p.83).

ACTIVITIES

1. DEBATE

Pupils read pp.79–83. Organise a class debate with the motion, 'It is always wrong to steal'.

2. DIALOGUE

You are the owner or assistant in the department store which sells picnic baskets filled with food.(p.86). Write the dialogue which might have taken place between yourself and Jimmy as he tried to buy one of these hampers.

3. CHARACTER SKETCH

Continue to add adjectives around the four frames, making sure there is evidence from the text.

4. EYEWITNESS RECORD

Pupils read pp.53–61, and write an eyewitness account of the scene from what they have read. They might also illustrate using the medium of their choice, under the title *Easter Monday, Dublin, 1916*.

5. ROLE PLAY

Organise a role play where Lily phones a chat-show host (Oprah, Kilroy-Silk, Gerry, Pat, Marian) to complain about her lot! Props: Two phones.

6. ITINERARY

On a photocopy of a map of Dublin city centre, plot Jimmy's journey to St Stephen's Green and back.

UNIT 3 THE CITY AT WAR

SUMMARY

Jimmy is surprised by the kindness of the British soldiers who give him food, shelter and money. A nasty encounter with Ella's husband puts Jimmy in hospital. Jimmy befriends a tramp. Meanwhile, appalling battle scenes are underway on Mount St Bridge.

Read pp.91–137.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Is there a bias in the book?
- If so, is the bias pro- or anti-British?
- Does it glorify war and make it appear glamorous?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER SKETCH

Add to the array of descriptive adjectives on the four pages. Are conflicting adjectives emerging for the same characters? Is this realistic?

2. ESSAY/POEM

Ask the pupils to write about an unexpected act of kindness shown to them or to a member of their family or friends.

How did they feel? How did they respond? How do they feel now? Has their experience changed their outlook?

If they cannot remember any, they could write about Jimmy's experience (pp.105 and 136–137).

3. LETTER WRITING

Private Jimmy Martin writes to his family, describing the day's events and telling of his meeting with Jimmy Conway. Write this letter, remembering that it may be read by the censors.

4. FILM POSTER

Pupils read pp.125–131. Imagine a film has been made of the battle on Mount St Bridge.

Ask the pupils to design a poster to promote this film, which has been called *Massacre on Mount St*.

5. ITINERARY

Plot Jimmy's journey to Northumberland Road on a photocopy of a map of Dublin.

6. INFORMATION SKILLS USING THE INTERNET

Using a search engine, key in 'Easter 1916'. Ask the pupils to find out the following information from the sites listed:

What was the document Pearse read from the steps of the GPO?

What was it about?

Who signed it?

Write a brief report on what you have learned.

UNIT 4 THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

SUMMARY

Fever puts Jimmy out of action for a day. Luckily, he meets up with the tramp who gives him shelter. Eventually, he finds Ella's house and there he discovers the reasons for her strange behaviour. Laden with food, he re-crosses the city and returns to his home, to the relief and joy of his family.

Read pp.138–167.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What kind of person is Ella?
- Do you think the tramp got the money and mouth organ that Jimmy left for him?
- Do you think the soldiers' kindness to Jimmy is realistic?
- Is the ending satisfactory?

ACTIVITIES

1. CHARACTER SKETCH

Complete and discuss findings.

Discuss how characters changed during the course of the book.

Discuss how the pupils' perceptions of the characters changed as more information was made available.

Does this happen in real life? Are we more tolerant of people when we get to know them better?

Select one character and write a detailed character sketch of them.

2. ITINERARY

Plot Jimmy's return journey.

3. BOOK REVIEW

Ask the pupils to write a book review. Discuss the format in advance. It should have the following elements:

- (a) Title, author
- (b) Publisher, year, year of reprints
- (c) ISBN

(d) Cover illustrator

(e) Short summary

(f) Your opinion of the book

(g) Marks out of 10

(h) Have you found learning about history from a novel more enjoyable or less enjoyable than working from a textbook? Give reasons for your answer.

4. BOOK COVER

Pretend that The O'Brien Press needs a cover design for a new edition of *The Guns of Easter*. Design the cover.

USEFUL ADDRESSES: MEMORIALS

For information on the Island of Ireland Peace Park, Messines, Flanders, visit http://www.mesen.be/en/toerisme/adr_essen.asp

For further information, contact In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres www.inflandersfields.be

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, GERARD WHELAN



GERARD WHELAN was born in Enniscorthy, County Wexford. He worked as a library assistant and bookseller in Dublin, and lived in London, Crete and Amsterdam before returning to Dublin to write full-time. *The Guns of Easter* was the winner of the 1997 Bisto Merit Award and the 1997 Eilís Dillon Memorial Award.

Other books by Gerard Whelan:

Dream Invader is the thrilling tale of how plucky Saskia has to fight a malign supernatural force – the Pooshipaw – to save the life of her young cousin, Simon. *Dream Invader* was the winner of the 1998 Bisto Book of the Year Award.



Out of Nowhere is the gripping story of Stephen and Kirsten and their terrifying journey into a parallel universe.



Another story about Jimmy and Sarah Conway.



A Winter of Spies is the sequel to *The Guns of Easter*. It is set in Dublin, four years later, and tells the story of the War of Independence where Jimmy's sister, now a rebellious 11-year-old, becomes involved in a war of 'spies and counter-spies, of whispers and assassinations' – all under the watchful eye of Michael Collins.

Read also:

Katie's War by Aubrey Flegg, a novel that tells of how one girl struggled to make sense of the turmoil in Ireland after the War of Independence.

