



Trinity College Dublin

The University of Dublin

JONATHAN SWIFT (1667-1745)

Ian Campbell Ross

Jonathan Swift is most famous as the author of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the most widely read book ever written in Ireland or by an Irish writer. Never out of print since its first publication, translated into countless languages, read in innumerable editions and abridgements, made into films and cartoons (one starring Mickey Mouse), and the subject of impassioned arguments over nearly three centuries as to its essential morality or misanthropy, *Gulliver's Travels* is nonetheless only a small part of Jonathan Swift's writings, in verse and prose, produced over a period of more than fifty years, during which he served as a priest of the Protestant Church of Ireland, most notably as Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

Swift was born in Dublin in 1667. His father, a lawyer, died before Jonathan's birth, and his childhood was partly spent in the care of a nurse and most likely in the absence of both parents. Certainly, he boarded at Kilkenny College between the ages of six and fourteen, receiving the foundations of the classical humanist education reserved for boys of his social class. In 1682, Swift entered what was then Ireland's only university, Trinity College Dublin, continuing his studies in Latin and Greek, adding Hebrew, and deepening his knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy. After four years, he graduated with the degree of B.A. *ex speciali gratia*—a term that Swift later glossed to imply that he had been a poor student but which most likely did not have the negative connotations Swift would later mischievously suggest. It is certain, though, that Swift was not an outstanding

undergraduate and having left Trinity College in 1686 he was perplexed as to a choice of career. Despite the help of his uncles—his father's brothers—Swift had no easy entry into a profession such as would enable him to retain the status of gentleman, so important in his age.

Political events forced his hand. Along with many other anxious Protestants, who feared reprisals from displaced and disadvantaged Catholics, Swift left Ireland abruptly in 1689, at the outset of the war between the Roman Catholic King James II and the Protestant William, Prince of Orange, whom the British parliament had invited to ascend the throne, following James's alleged abdication. William III's eventual success in the struggle for the throne, marked by notable victories at the battles of the Boyne and Aughrim, and secured by means of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, led Swift to write and publish his first known composition: an ambitious (though hardly successful) Pindaric Ode, *To the King: On his Irish Expedition and the Success of his Arms in General* (1691). In part, the poem was an appeal to William himself whom Swift saw as a possible patron. By one account, indeed, Swift would later meet the monarch who offered him a commission in the army. If the story is true, it was an offer Swift declined. At first, he became a secretary to Sir William Temple, a notable diplomat in his day and a writer of some renown, at Temple's English estate: Moor Park in Surrey. Despite misgivings, unusual in his day, about entering the Church 'merely for support' (Swift 1962, 193) Swift returned to Ireland to take holy orders, becoming a deacon in late 1694 and a priest in January 1695. Within a fortnight, he was appointed to the living of Kilroot, near Carrickfergus, on the northside of Belfast Lough. It would prove to be both a short and unhappy experience for the young clergyman who found himself in a parish with a dilapidated church and a scanty congregation, surrounded by a strong Presbyterian community. Swift's lifelong hostility to Roman Catholicism and Presbyterianism—though not to individuals of either community—was already

established. Disenchanted, Swift left Kilroot and returned to act as secretary to Temple in England.

Throughout the 1690s, Swift persisted with his poetry, in a succession of odes—both Pindaric and Horatian, one prudently dedicated to Sir William Temple. It was in support of his patron's position in the controversy between the Ancients and the Moderns—a European-wide dispute as to whether modern learning represented an advance on the wisdom of the classical worlds of Greece and Rome—that Swift wrote the first of those works still widely read today: *The Battle of the Books* (written 1697; pub. 1704). A playfully serious, mock-heroic account of a conflict between the books in St. James's Library, *The Battle of the Books* ends with the victory of the ancients, so supporting Temple, whose own work, however, had come under increasing attack by learned contemporaries. Despite the evident self-interest, however, there is little reason to believe that Swift did not in fact admire the achievements of the pagan Ancients. There were many features of modern thought—from freethinking in religion to empirical science based on the use of individual reason—that Swift regarded with scepticism or distaste and which would serve as targets for his satire.

Sir William Temple died in 1700. Having overseen the publication of his patron's *Letters*, Swift returned to Ireland the following year. Serving as chaplain to the earl of Berkeley, one of the lords justice who governed Ireland in the absence of the Lord-Lieutenant (or Viceroy) he was appointed to a much more congenial living, Laracor, near Trim in Co. Meath, a day's ride from Dublin. In that same year, Swift published anonymously—as would be his lifelong habit *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and Commons in Athens and Rome* (1701), a work which brought together Swift's classical learning with his intense interest in political and constitutional questions. Living at a time when the modern party political system was a novelty, Swift engaged with the disputes of Whig and Tory, while attempting to stand above the fray. He considered himself a Whig in politics and a Tory in religion: that is, a believer in the new balance of power

between the King, Lords and Commons, brought in by the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 but also a supporter of the Tories' privileging of the established, Anglican church over all religious dissent.

A Discourse testifies to the fascination with politics that would mark Swift's life, though he never obtained the political position in England he desired. Instead, he slowly consolidated his position within the Church of Ireland. In October 1700, he took possession of a prebendal stall in St. Patrick's Cathedral, so increasing his income. Swift had taken an M.A. at Hart Hall, in the University of Oxford in 1692 and in 1701 he acquired a doctorate in divinity at Trinity College Dublin. For the remainder of his life, Swift would maintain a close interest in the College, notably through friends such as Patrick Delany who were Fellows there. At times, his interest would not always have been welcome: one story relates how in 1718 he and Benjamin Pratt, the Dean of Down, 'made merry' at the misfortunes of the 'outrageously bad' College and at the hapless efforts of the-then Provost to reform it. But, as late as 1739, Swift was still, by tradition, taking a positive interest in his old university, helping the medical school acquire an important collection of anatomical models. More importantly, as will appear, Swift's time as a student at Trinity College Dublin would influence some of his greatest works.

The publication of *A Tale of a Tub*, which appeared along with *The Battle of the Books* and *A Discourse on the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* in 1704, marked a new level of public attention to Swift's writings. As was most often the case with Swift, this work was published anonymously which, given its immediate notoriety, as just as well. Apparently intended as a defence of Anglican doctrine and an attack on freethinking, the work was received by some readers, including the distinguished philosopher and Anglican clergyman, Samuel Clarke, as an attack on Christianity itself. The core of *A Tale* is the allegorical history of the church related through the story of three brothers—Peter (Roman Catholicism, from St. Peter); Martin (Anglicanism, from Martin Luther); and Jack (Puritan dissent, from John Calvin)—and their efforts to interpret the will of their father (holy scripture),

often in their own self-interest. Though the debate is, apparently, resolved in favour of Martin, *A Tale* interleaves the allegory with a series of digressions that challenge the reader's own powers of interpretation. So, the celebrated 'Digression on Madness' (Section IX) leads readers along a tortuous path to the unChristian conclusion that happiness is no more than 'the possession of being well deceived; the serene peaceful state of being a fool among knaves'. The playful and disconcerting elements of *A Tale* may derive from the satire's possible status as a 'coterie' work—i.e. a collection of pieces by several hands—having its origins in a parodic 'tripos' speech delivered in Trinity College Dublin as long ago as 1688. Taking form gradually during the late-1690s it may eventually have been published without Swift's full consent or knowledge. Although he later reputedly declared 'Good God, what a genius I had when I wrote that book' (Swift 1958, xix), Swift was quick to respond to hostile criticism and he revised and enlarged *A Tale*—notably by adding an 'Author's Apology'—until it reached its 5th edition, and final state, in 1710. Even in that form it continued—and continues—to bemuse as well as amuse readers and Queen Anne is alleged to have denied Swift the promotion he coveted on the grounds that the author of *A Tale* was too dangerous to be made a bishop.

Swift's place in Church of Ireland affairs was enhanced, however, in 1707 when he was sent to London, charged with persuading the Whig government to abandon the 'First Fruits' and 'Twentieth Parts', two taxes that the financially insecure Anglican clergy declared they found it hard to pay. He remained in the English capital for three years, during which time he made a reputation for himself by means of works that were known to be his, though never openly acknowledged. These included; the Bickerstaff Papers (1708; a pamphlet hoax that persuaded readers that the supposed Whig almanac maker and astrologer John Partridge had died, forcing Partridge to proclaim his continuity vitality) and two imaginative urban poems—'Description of the Morning' (1709) and 'Description of a City Shower' (1710)—published in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's popular *Tatler*

newspaper. When a Tory ministry replaced the Whigs in 1710, the new first minister, Robert Harley, found it expedient to grant Swift and the Church of Ireland the tax concessions they had sought in vain for the previous three years. Swift fully repaid Harley's confidence by editing the Tory newspaper, *The Examiner* (1710-11) and by writing the highly influential pamphlet, *The Conduct of the Allies* (1712), which helped turn public opinion against British participation in the long-lasting War of the Spanish Succession.

In time, Swift would look back the years 1710-13 as the finest of his life. He met with distinguished contemporaries, including the poet Alexander Pope; the playwright John Gay; the writer and Queen's Anne's physician, John Arbuthnot; and Robert Harley, in the Scriblerus Club. The Scriblerians would, over many future years, produce much prose and verse written individually or in collaboration. In private, Swift wrote one of his most intriguing works, the so-called *Journal to Stella*. This 'journal'—which remained unpublished as such until 1784—is in fact a collection of letters written by Swift between 1710 and 1713 to Hester Johnson, known to him as 'Stella'.

Swift's relationships with women have long intrigued readers, including Horace Walpole and W. B. Yeats. As a young clergyman in Kilroot in the 1690s, Swift became emotionally entangled with Jane Waring, 'Varina', whom he at first rejected as a wife, before finding himself rejected in turn. In Moor Park, he encountered the eight-year old Hester Johnson, a ward (and possible natural daughter) of William Temple. Following Temple's death, Hester moved to Dublin, along with a companion, Rebecca Dingley, to live there for the remainder of her life, despite having, at first, no connection with the city except Swift himself. The letters in the *Journal*, addressed to both Hester and Rebecca, and often couched in baby talk, are a fascinating source of information about the social life of early-eighteenth century London and also invite speculation about Swift's emotional life. According to one (plausible) tale, Swift married Hester secretly in 1716; in another version, he was never alone with her throughout the near forty years of their

friendship. When he was in London, however, he formed a close friendship with a still younger woman, Esther Vanhomrigh, daughter of a former Lord Mayor of London, whom he called 'Vanessa'. Whatever Swift's feelings, Esther was evidently deeply smitten with Swift, leading the by-then Dean of St. Patrick's to pen his longest poem, 'Cadenus and Vanessa' ('Cadenus' being an anagram of 'Decanus', Latin for 'Dean'). In it, he uneasily attempted to put his relationship on a less intense footing. Their friendship survived Swift's return to Dublin but when Esther, who also returned to Ireland, belatedly learned of Swift's attachment to Hester Johnson, she allegedly rode from her home in Celbridge, Co. Kildare, taxed Swift with duplicity, and broke off all contact with him, dying young in 1722. Swift's reaction to Esther's death is unknown but when Stella, to whom he addressed some of his most tender poems, died in 1728, Swift penned a memorial that is among the most moving testaments to affection in the whole of Irish, or English, literature.

By the late-1720s, Swift's life had changed beyond recognition. Having spent two decades hoping for 'a fat deanery or lean bishopric' in England, he was appointed Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1713. A year later, the death of Queen Anne and the renewed ascendancy of the Whigs ended all hope of further Church preferment in England. After two decades of moving constantly between Ireland and England, Swift would only make two short visits to England—home to his closest male friends—in thirty years. The return of the Whigs to government also forced Swift to maintain a prudent silence on public affairs for six years, his mail being opened by political opponents anxious to find evidence of treasonable Jacobite sympathies.

In 1720 Swift wrote publicly once more but this time it was an *Irish* readership he addressed. Since the late-fifteenth century, the Irish parliament's ability to enact legislation had been constrained by the superior powers of the parliament in Westminster. The resentment felt in Ireland, especially over trade restrictions, intensified after the British legislature passed the Declaratory Act of 1720, insisting that the Kingdom of Ireland was dependent on the parliament of

Great Britain. Swift's response was, on the face of it, innocuous: an anonymous pamphlet entitled *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture* (1720), urging Irish men and women to use home-produced goods and reject imports from England. The pamphlet's implicit challenge to the supremacy of the British parliament enraged the ministry, however. A reward was offered to anyone who could identify the writer and, in the absence of any such betrayal—though Swift's authorship was an open secret in Dublin—the printer Edward Waters was charged with seditious libel and tried before the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. When the jury returned with a verdict of 'not guilty', Chief Justice Whitshed sent them back to reconsider and did so on nine occasions until the jury told him it could not agree a verdict. Only Swift's private intervention prevented Waters being retried for the same offence.

A more serious challenge to Britain's right to interfere in Irish economic affairs arose in 1722. Then, an English iron-master, William Wood, was granted a patent to produce around £100,000 of copper currency for Ireland. Resistance to this slowly gathered force and in 1724 Jonathan Swift wrote the first of his celebrated *Drapier's Letters* (1724-5), pamphlets that exhorted all Irish men and women to reject 'Wood's Halfpence' on moral and political grounds and those of economic self-interest. Again the government offered a reward for discovery of the identity of the anonymous author but once more Swift avoided prosecution and, in 1725, had the satisfaction of seeing the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland signal that Wood's patent would be withdrawn, in a speech delivered on the occasion of the opening of the new session of the Irish parliament.

Swift was now hailed as a national hero, at least by the so-called Protestant nation who exercised power in Ireland. He was accorded prestige and public demonstrations of admiration along with the freedom of the City of Dublin and the title of 'Hibernian Patriot'. His response, characteristically, was to play down the significance of his achievements, even in private correspondence with his friends. Instead, he turned his energies to completing the book he had been writing for the

past several years: *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* (1726), universally known as *Gulliver's Travels*. Using the form of a first-person travel narrative—Swift was an avid reader of travel writing—the fiction relates, in four books, the adventures of Lemuel Gulliver, at first a ship's surgeon, later a sea-captain, into Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and Houyhnhnmland. Again, Swift gave no indication that he was the author and presented his new work in such a way that its first readers could not have immediately known it was a fiction at all. Beyond the humour that has appealed to readers of all ages for nearly 300 years, *Gulliver's Travels* takes a range of satirical targets, from contemporary politics through experimental science to human pride. The fourth and most controversial book, 'A Voyage into the Country of the Houyhnhmms' sees Gulliver's encounter with the rational horses—the Houyhnhmms—and the irrational primates, the Yahoos. Some contemporaries allegedly thought it an 'insult on Providence' and had difficulties in reconciling the savagery of Swift's satire with the value contemporary Christianity placed on human life. In the nineteenth century, the novelist W.M. Thackeray thought the book 'a monster gibbering shrieks and gnashing imprecations against mankind' though in a review of a controversial twentieth-century work—James Joyce's *Ulysses*—T. S. Eliot pronounced Swift's masterpiece 'one of the greatest triumphs that the human soul has ever achieved' (Eliot 1975, 176).

It was to oversee the London publication of *Gulliver's Travels* that Swift made the first of his two last visits to England: in 1726 and again the following year. For the rest, he devoted himself not only to the Church of Ireland—he was a notably conscientious Dean of St. Patrick's—and to writing voluminously in verse and prose. In prose, his most famous work of the 1720s was *A Modest Proposal* (1729), a short ironic pamphlet that proposes an economic solution to the problem of Irish poverty in terms that retain the power to shock even today. The terrible distress that characterized Ireland at this time—leading to the loss of population by starvation and emigration—also prompted Swift to write the eloquent 'Short View of

the Present State of Ireland' (1728) and, with his friend and fellow-clergyman, Thomas Sheridan, to produce a weekly paper, *The Intelligencer* (1728-9).

The late-1720s and 1730s also saw Swift produce some of his finest poetry. Aside from the birthday poems to Stella, which show a tenderness little in evidence elsewhere, Swift produced the so-called 'scatological' poems, including 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed', 'The Lady's Dressing Table', and 'Strephon and Chloe', which take delight in exposing the dirty and diseased bodies that lie beneath the fine surface of eighteenth—(or any other) century life. Finest of all is the profoundly ambiguous 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift', in which Swift imagines the reaction of friends, enemies and readers following his demise.

In fact, Swift would live for a decade after writing that poem but in increasingly poor health, especially due to what is now thought to have been Menière's Disease, a degenerative illness that affects the small brain, producing deafness and vertigo. The symptoms alarmed, as well as distressed, Swift who, throughout his life, seems to have feared going mad. The popular image of the 'mad' Swift has long been discredited but in the final years of his life he succumbed to senile dementia, and was put in the care of a guardian. Before those last days arrived, though, Swift had prepared an elaborate plan for alleviating the distress of those suffering from mental illness. In his will, he left money for the building of a hospital to be run on lines very different from the 'bedlams' —Bethlehem hospitals —of London or Dublin. That hospital was St. Patrick's Hospital, Dublin, which opened in 1759 and continues to treat sufferers today.

Jonathan Swift died in 1745, at the age of 78, in the city where he was born. He is buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral. He had long written his own Latin epitaph, which is to be seen in the cathedral today. Almost two centuries later, W. B. Yeats rendered the epitaph in English verse:

Swift has sailed into his rest;

Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his breast.
Imitate him if you dare,
World-besotted traveller; he
Served human liberty.

Works Cited

T. S. Eliot, '*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*,' in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1976.

Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a tub: to which is added the Battle of the books and the Mechanical operation of the spirit*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

-----, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. 5 ed. Herbert Davis. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.

Cite as: 'Jonathan Swift' by Ian Campbell Ross at <http://www.tcd.ie/trinitywriters>.

First published January 2016.