

John Galt: The Practical Romantic?

Galt's literary fate has been to stand behind Scott and Hogg, although his best work more than stands comparison, and Ringan Gilhaize (1823) is to my mind the finest Covenanting novel of the great three, including Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816), and Hogg's *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818). Why has he been overshadowed? And how should we now revalue him?

Galt has been seen variously as a philosophical realist, a Rigorous Calvinist Predestinarian, a believer in Providence, a failed business man, a 'theoretical historian' and an almost Kailyard anecdotal writer of quasi-fiction.

What is the essential Galt? Arguably what has been the biggest challenge to reputation and a Galt collected edition has been the huge amount and range of his work; travel, non-fiction, including school text-books, Canadian affairs and business reflections, (good) biographies of Wolsey, Byron and West, unsuccessful plays and poetry, at least 25 novels, in world-ranging settings from Scotland and Europe to Canada – and of course the cobbled together novel and stories of *Stories of the Study of 1833*.

Critic after critic after Scott and Byron have condemned Galt's historical romances, his dramas, his poetry and non-fiction, leaving us with the Scottish - and the last, (Scottish derived) fiction, the novellas and sketches rescued by Ian Gordon in 1978. (As Gordon demonstrates, Galt is a bibliographer's nightmare; he frustratingly tells us in the *Literary Life* of works untraceable or published anonymously in Blackwood, Fraser's and Tait's magazines.) I argue that Galt – like so many Scottish writers from Scott, Hogg and Stevenson to Buchan, Barrie and MacDiarmid – never escaped what Edwin Muir called the predicament of the Scottish writer, a cultural predicament involving crucial split allegiances and choices of audience and language. For all his literary career Galt moved uncertainly between his remembered Scottish experience and writing for a much wider and English fashionable audience. We must then add to this the division throughout his life (similar to Scott's divisions of interest between law and literature) between his extraordinary business as parliamentary Lobbyist and pioneer in Canadian affairs on one hand, and the aspiring British writer on the other.

There is an Autobiography and a very different Literary Life. The Autobiography shows us a sharp pragmatist in business and a major, if contumacious contributor to young Canada who has bad luck (bankruptcy, debtor's prison) and (like the great nineteenth century Orkneyman explorer of Canada, John Rae) suffering from the cultural gap between Imperial London and Canadian wilderness. The Literary Life recalls the huge diversity of his writing, from successes like *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey* and his *Life of Byron*, with whom he travelled in Europe and beyond (described in his early *Travels in the Levant*).

It would be tempting but wrong at this point, in contrasting Galt's huge output of factual and statistical writing to exploit his mentor Henry Mackenzie's opposition of 'The Man of the World', against 'the Man of Feeling', given the two extremes of Galt's writing. We could argue for Galt a 'Man of Feeling' persona, producing Micah Balwhidder, Sir Andrew Wylie, scenes like the death of Betty Bodle, or the sketches of *The Mem* and *The Seamstress*,

But this is too facile. Is not Provost Pawkie so clearly *The Man of the World*, with his companions, from *The Member*, the *Dean of Guild*, *A Rich Man*, together with the many sketches of opportunist and expedient self-made men (and women) like the *Walkinshaws* (including *Leddy Grippy*!). But then, there is the pawkie and successful social climber who is also a sentimentalist, in *Sir Andrew Wylie* of 1822, a novel in which Galt anticipates the juxtapositions of cruel satire and sentiment in the complex fictions of James Barrie?

Fine critics like John McQueen and Keith Costain have sought, to my mind excessively, to place Galt in a context of the Scottish Enlightenment, or as a predestinarian Calvinist. Galt, while a voracious reader, was something of an anomaly - a 'superior autodidact', somewhere between Hogg and Scott. Scott has been called 'The Practical Romantic' - but the term can just as easily be applied to Galt, as he moves dramatically in his best fiction - and even in his realist and man of the world writing - between romance and realism. We recall his romantic attempts on his travels to set up an elaborate smuggling trade scheme, to bypass Napoleon's Blockade of Britain - or his wonderful descriptions in letters to DM Moir evoking the majesty of Canada's lakes, and their singing boatmen (intriguingly, his letters ask Moir to write poetry of this!).

'Providence' is by far the most used term in Galt's writing. Professor McQueen quotes Galt from *The Literary Life*: 'In the order of things...the providence of God is

constantly seen; ... such is the harmony of the universe'. Contrarily, in the same passage Galt confuses the reader by concluding that actions (presumably such as those of Micah and Pawkie) produce an effect previously determined – 'this is the law of necessity, philosophical fatality, religious predestinarianism: but it is not 'According to the doctrine of a particular Providence'. McQueen goes on usefully to question Micah's convenient and consoling reliance on Providence as demonstrating his limited perspective. I suggest that the consistency of Galt's 'philosophy' can be questioned, given the contradictory nature of his Calvinist aesthetic and pragmatic loyalties.

I do wonder whether like Scott and Hogg, despite his Presbyterian upbringing and his contemporary rationalism as a man of pragmatic affairs left him ambivalent as regards accepting that 'Providence' rules all. Like McQueen, I find numerous points in *The Annals* where Micah's simplistic belief in random events as pre-ordained can be interpreted as Galt satirising his minister's need to find God's hand in all. And does not Galt's Provost find Providence providing a very helpful advantage to himself and family, as so many of Galt's self-made and narrow-minded men do?

Dare I suggest that critics have missed something of the figure in the carpet (to appropriate Henry James?) I tentatively offer 'a Galt's progress' in what I regard as his major and Scottish fiction? No need on this occasion to celebrate *Annals* and *Provost*; Whatley and sadly missed Kenneth Simpson have wonderfully demonstrated both Galt's imaginative capturing of the end of old Ayrshire and the immense subtlety of Galt's fundamentally decent, self-deceiving, limited and unreliable Micah, who nevertheless lets us read behind his account to guess at social, personal and emotional truths which he can't himself see.

At this point I suggest that, as Eric Frykman early argued, the key to Galt's greatest fiction lies in his literary ventriloquism, when Galt conceals himself behind his many voices, voices creatively remembered from Ayrshire childhood listening and constant revisiting to exploit the fading richness of dialect (a dialect he himself adds to with his astonishing rich Joycean phrases and coinages). In the best of his extended dramatic monologues, Galt rivals Hogg's *Justified Sinner* (I think of the voice of Ringan Gilhaize here particularly - and even of Burns's use of adopted voices of his ideological opponents, from fanatical Calvinists to Holy Willie and Beelezebub).

I suggest that Galt had differing ideological perspectives; that he was deeply influenced by Calvinism, yet, when necessary, a pragmatic realist and Man of the World - and also indeed an Ayrshire Man of Feeling. I argue that in his best work Galt finds a rich

synthesis of pragmatic scepticism regarding human motivation, and a deeply felt, if ambivalent affection for his Gathered people of the West and Glasgow. I'm suggesting that it's not necessary to deny that, like Scott's lawyers or Hogg's Borderers, these are a fusion and a gathering together of fact and fiction. Galt's insistence that these are 'theoretical histories' seems to me contrived, since as numerous critics have pointed out, they may reflect social change, as Scottish fiction does, from Scott to Douglas Brown of *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901), and that they rank alongside them as outstanding achievements in our best imaginative and creative fiction.

I suggest a simple answer to the astonishing range of quality in Galt's output; that as a London literary figure striving for fashionable success in poetry, drama and fashionable fiction he fails, since (as opposed to his more forensic biographical work on Wolsey, West, and Byron, or his often vivid letters to Moir). He is lost, like Hogg and even Scott, when outwith his essential genius – but so wonderfully different, when his sly, worldly persona fuses with his essential Ayrshire and Western imaginative, humane and richly linguistic memory. Thus he simultaneously celebrates and satirises, empathises and yet remains separate, with an ever growing reductive idiom which marvellously manages to show the superficial smallmindedness of Ayrshire and Glasgow while revealing the wonderful diversity yet similarity of human emotion and politics in small places.

I used the term 'ever-growing reductive idiom' deliberately. Sir Andrew Wylie is my least favourite Galt novel; for me its rags to riches story of the orphan Andrew who becomes the pawkie, humble adviser of fashionable London Lords and Ladies is far too close to the 1890s Kailyard school for comfortable reading –even Kailyarder SR Crockett, introducing Blackwood's 1895 edition, complained of this 'Caliban' in gay society; 'the oaf wears his oafdom a trifle too obviously'. This novel betrays Galt's desire for fashionable success; Andrew's patrons, the aristocratic Sandyfords, are modelled on Galt's patrons and dedicatees, the aristocratic Blessingtons. And by now (1822) Blackwood was pressing too hard; Galt became increasingly resentful of interference.

Arguably this interference, the insistence on three volumes, spoils what could have been Galt's masterpiece, *The Entail*, with its astonishing portrayal of Scottish 'yird-hunger'. Part One, Claud Walkinshaw's warped entail, monstrously distorting his descendants, is arguably the finest study (next to Ringan) we have of peculiarly Scottish obsession. The second half, while still powerful, especially in its development of the matchless Leddy Grippy, falters with the Ossianic intrusion of Highland Mrs Eadie

(understandably moo'd at by a neighbouring cow while vaguely prophesying), while George Walkinshaw and his cheaterly relatives are pale and nasty shadows of Claud.

If Galt had in these two novels abandoned Blackwood's advice to speak in a voice not his own, he returned in Ringan Gilhaize to his literary ventriloquism with (literally) a vengeance. Like Hogg, resenting Scott's establishment friendly Old Mortality from the perspective of community memory. That this, the darkest and most compelling of all Galt's dramatic monologues should have languished until Meldrum and Roughead's edition of 1936 and Patricia Wilson's fine edition of 1984, is almost inexplicable. It is an astonishing act of ventriloquism; Galt was at pains to explain that these were not his sentiments, that he was explaining why and how a Covenanter might inherit the values of his ancestors – yet implying enough to the reader to once again 'read through' the monologue to be able to detect other, more moderate values and characters. That said, this is by far the most eloquent and moving recreation of sympathy for the sufferings of the reformed peasantry in our literature. Paradoxically, it is also where Galt reveals that Ringan's Providence is closer to Chance in its arbitrary work than the Hand of God or any benign Fate. Ringan may kill Claverhouse, and the reader may for a moment share his exultation; but history, on reflection, has already decided Scotland's fate, with 1689 and the coming of William of Orange.

This was followed by Galt's major attempt at a Scott historical novel, in *The Spaewife* of 1823. This, while having real skill in its analysis of the tragic results of Robert II's disastrous annulment of his legitimate Ross children's rights in favour of his bastard Mure line (reminiscent of Walkinshaw's disastrous Entail, in all that it subsequently 'entails', only on a national scale), reflects Galt's confusions as to his literary allegiances for here are echoes of *Macbeth* and *The Lady of the Lake*, as well as a kind of sequel to *The Fair Maid of Perth*. *The Spaewife* herself is Galt's only real attempt at the Scottish traditional supernatural of Hogg and Scott; like Scott's *Meg Merrilies*, as she threads the novel with her crazy and obscure prophecies of doom. However, the novel's semi-plagiarisms, and Galt's deep-seated prejudice against Highlanders, should not obscure Galt's recreation of the tragedy of the murder of James I in 1430. This is a genuinely tragic historical novel, reflective of Galt's growing Scottish negativism.

Galt's attitudes to Scotland - and the world - darken through the 1820s, as bankruptcy, and disillusionment with business and Canadian affairs lead to his questionable imprisonment in London for alleged negligence and debt. (Certainly those Canadians on whose behalf he

had worked tirelessly - if sometimes provocatively – acknowledged his work in developing upper Canada, and the town of Galt, named for his efforts.

Re-reading *Last of the Lairds* of 1826, I was struck by its ferocious satire on a greedy decaying community, rather than Ian Gordon's description as 'high-spirited farce'. Here, rather, is all of the gossip and malice of *The House with the Green Shutters* or the nastier 'speak' of *A Scots Quair*. Galt satirises himself, as the teller, in his sly interference no better than the miserly, foolish old laird and his confederates like the viciously meddling Mrs Soorocks. The novel (available as bowdlerised by Blackwood and Moir till 1974) is a post-mortem of a community in its death-throes.

Ian Gordon finds an Indian summer for Galt in the early 1830s, highlighting novellas like *The Member* and *The Radical*, *The Dean of Guild* and his faux autobiographical business life of a Scottish Mayor of London, Archibald Plack, in *A Rich Man* (1832). I acknowledge the successful return to literary ventriloquism; but am I alone in finding these somewhat formulaic? The rich Scots of the 1820s has become Scottish accented English; and while Galt continues to satirise his own Tory loyalties and to reveal his latent Whig sympathies, the redeeming features of *Balwhidder*, *Pawkie* and even *Ringan* are missing. British and Scottish politics and their practitioners are by now tainted by obvious greed and prejudice. And while we should acknowledge the new explicit, if disillusioned sympathy for the forgotten women of Scotland in the 1830s stories *The Mem*, *The Seamstress*, the manipulative *Gudewife*, and *The Howdie* the mood of these stories is overall elegiac.

Galt had shown explicitly in novels like *The Majolo*, *Spaewife* and especially *The Omen* of 1825 that he had a vein of morbid Gothic mysticism. And for me, there is one last novella which, while exploiting this former mysticism, breaks entirely new ground, and which constitutes Galt's mysteriously moving and atypical farewell to life and literature.

Let me first remind you that throughout his writing Galt has told us very little of his private and emotional life, beyond the bald facts of his marriage to Elizabeth Tilloch and his obvious pride in the impressive advancement in Canada of his sons. I finish with *The Tribulations of the Reverend Cowal Kilmun* of 1835-6; and while Galt does not break his lifetime reticence regarding his private life, this strangely powerful novella breaks entirely new and arguably self-revelatory ground through the out-of-the world Micah-like account by Cowal of his strange involvement with two men – Mr Ettles, the young man setting out on his American business ventures, and his friend, Mr Roslin, the returning colonial emigrant. As Ian Gordon suggests, they are all versions of Galt; 'The strange power of this story

undoubtedly springs from its unconscious symbolism....the three central figures are all aspects of Galt. Mr Roslin is the returned colonial emigrant. Mr Ettles [Galt's motto in Canada: 'I ettle'] is the failed man of affairs. The Reverend Cowal Kilmun and his sister Becky parallel Galt's own situation in Greenock after 1834, living quietly in the old family home.

I would go further. I suggest that Galt, now terminally ill, in almost dream-like fashion sums up the three aspects of his life, and additionally suggests some hidden sadnesses in Galt's relationships and fortune. This last ventriloquism creates Cowal, who lives across from Greenock, in Kilmun and out of the busy world, reflecting on the vagaries of worldly fortune. I believe that in this last, 'mystical' [Cowal's repeated word in the novella] story, and in its anti-climactic sad surrealism, Galt comes as close as anywhere in his work to revealing something of his private life. Much remains hidden, but in the novella there is perhaps a fitting symbolism for the strange combination of magnificent imaginative creativity and failed pragmatism of this great Scottish writer.