

THE GREATEST IRISH WRITER: GOLDSMITH

(By the Rev. J. KELLY, Ph.D., for the *N.Z. Tablet*.)

In the perspective of that wonderful literary landscape of which the central figure is Johnson, after the lapse of more than two centuries no figure excepting that of the master himself stands out so clearly as Goldsmith's. That in his life time he had not the brilliant conversational powers, and the ready wit, and the command of language of his associates, we all know. In conversation and debate, his mind worked none too clearly; and a certain gaucherie, begotten of self-depreciation and of a keen sense of his own ridiculousness, always trammelled him. So much so, that a superficial judge like the parasite Boswell, a garrulous, vapid Scot who has been borne to repute on the giant shoulders of Johnson, could call Goldsmith 'an inspired idiot.'

The accent is strong on 'inspired,' if the verdict of prosperity counts. The inspired idiot was the man of whom grand, honest Johnson wrote that graceful phrase for the Westminster Abbey monument:—*'Nullum fere scribendi genus non tetigit nullum quod tetigit non ornavit.'* When or where was higher or sincerer tribute paid to genius and versatility? There was hardly a department of writing he did not touch; and whatever he touched he adorned. And over his grave the great Doctor and Edmund Burke wept bitter tears of sorrow for the most lovable of all that coterie of men of letters who foregathered at White's.

Burke, no doubt, was 'the supreme writer of his century,' as De Quincey calls him, and such competent critics as Matthew Arnold and Lord Morley have put his position as a master of English prose beyond question; the pathos, the humor, the delineation of character, of Sterne, are, in spite of his prurieny and profanity, unrivalled; and, when at his best, Mangan is probably our greatest poetic luminary. But taken all in all, there was none of them who could rival Goldsmith.

When *The Traveller* appeared in 1764, it was hailed with delight, and the universal judgment was that nothing so beautiful and original had appeared since the time of Pope. Two years later *The Vicar of Wakefield* was published; and Goldsmith got thirty pounds for it! His reputation was established, and he went on from success to success. That tender, perfect poem, *The Deserted Village*, appeared in 1770; and in 1773 *She Stoops to Conquer* was acted for the first time. The little poem *Retaliation* gives us delightful sketches of his great contemporaries, Garrick, Burke, and Reynolds. His *Letters From a Citizen of the World* contain charming descriptions of English life and manners, with their foibles and peculiarities, as they appear to an outsider; and they are, according to a recent writer, the literary forebears of the prefaces of Mr. Shaw.

In everything Goldsmith wrote, whether in prose or verse, there is a peculiar refinement and delicacy, both of language and sentiment. Not only was he the purest writer of an age inclined to coarseness, but he also maintained a high standard of style and was never vulgar or commonplace. He had pre-eminently the qualities of 'sweetness and light' so dear to Matthew Arnold; and his careless, good-natured, Irish character gave to all he wrote a characteristic tenderness, and melody, and grace.

The Vicar of Wakefield is one of the few books which by force of pure genius stand out like beacons above the flood of literature (and illiterature) flowing through the centuries. It would be interesting to make out a list of such books; it would not be a long one if confined to prose; and of them all there would be none to surpass in grace and purity the masterpiece of Goldsmith. It is as different from *Gil Blas* or *Il Decamerone*, or *Tristram Shandy* as the breath of a country lane is from the malodor of the Liffey at low water. And when you hear people talk of the silliness and absurdity of the plot of *The Vicar* you will do well to remember that for one man it was the ideal novel. And as that man was Wolfgang von Goethe,

probably the greatest man of letters the world ever knew, it is quite possible he was a better judge than most of us.

Another great German, Heinrich Heine, divided mankind offhand into two vast categories—Philistines and Hellenes. I have always thought that Goldsmith was the most essentially Hellene of English writers. His directness is essentially Greek. So is the simplicity, the haunting melody, the indefinable pathos, the perfect beauty of his verse. The light touch which gives us such lovely pictures of Sweet Auburn, the grace of style which makes *The Vicar* a classic for ever, the lucidity and rhythmic flow of his essays, are all Greek in the best sense of the word.

What a life was Goldsmith's! Think of his childhood in the quiet Longford village where his father, a poor curate with a large family, struggled to make ends meet; of a humble sizarship in Trinity, where he was more noted for irregularity, and improvidence, and charity, than for application to study; of his *Wanderjahre* in Holland, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy; when he followed the road as an itinerant flute-player, depending for his subsistence on charity. And when, in 1756, he came back to London, the hardships and the miseries of his life for eight years would have killed the soul of most men. But he fought famine, and the drudgery of a bookseller's hack, and the bondage of teaching, and mockery, and misery, with the heart of a genius, doing even in this obscure period, some of his best work.

When his fame was firmly established, his lavish prodigality and improvidence kept him deep in debt, and at the nod of booksellers who called upon him for works he was in no way qualified to write. To this period belong such books as the *History of England*, the *History of Greece*, and the *History of Animated Nature*—all, in spite of his ignorance of the subjects and want of sympathy with them, written in his own inimitable style.

His end, too, was characteristic of him. He used to boast that he had taken a medical degree at Padua; and his vaunted skill in medicine made him the subject of much good-humored banter among his friends. He contracted a dangerous disease, for which, against the advice of his physicians, he persisted in employing a violent remedy which probably hastened his death. He was only forty-six when he died, to the intense grief not only of that glorious circle of great minds amid which he had moved, but also of an unknown, humble, and wretched multitude to whom his limitless benevolence had endeared him. He was buried in the Temple Churchyard in April, 1776; and in the English Santa Croce, Westminster Abbey, he has a monument to his memory with that graceful epitaph which Johnson wrote for his dead friend to keep his memory green. He had a child's spirit and a kind heart. In his lifetime the truly great and noble knew his worth and appreciated his genius. Posterity has endorsed their verdict, and after over two centuries his glory has not faded. And this was the man whom Boswell patronised, confessing that he liked to hear honest Goldsmith run on!

It is announced that a notification has been issued by the War Office that the tender of Bell's Asbestos Co., Ltd. (John Chambers and Sons local agents), has been accepted for the supply during the three years 1914, 1915, and 1916, of Asbestos-Cement ('Poilite') Roofing Slates, Wall and Ceiling Sheets, etc., made at the company's Poilite factory, London....

BAXTER'S LUNG PRESERVER

is a cough mixture prepared from the most soothing, healing, and strengthening medicines known.

Against it a cough or cold has no chance. It goes straight to the seat of the trouble and fights the cold out of the system.

Sold everywhere—in large and small bottles.

Large size, 1/10.

HOLMES BROS.

Reduces your Boot Bill by giving you the Utmost Value. Test us. We hold a Large Stock of the celebrated "MARLOW," "BOSTOCK," and Crockett Jones Boots. Note address—TAY ST., INVERCARGILL,