

**Turriff:**  
**THE DEVERON PRESS**  
**1916-2016**  
**[www.theveronpress.scot](http://www.theveronpress.scot)**

John Galt, The First of the Kailyarders  
A neglected Man of Genius – and Why  
By James Leatham.

What's the matter with John Galt? The author of a whole library of books that were widely read and praised in their day, member of Parliament, Colonial pioneer, friend and biographer of Byron, rival of Sir Walter, first and greatest of the kailyarders, most Scottish of the Scots, poet, politician, playwright, man of business, he has long since been 'out of print' except for a single volume in a popular series. Those who would read Galt can do so only in scarce volumes of an old date.

'The Entail,' probably Galt's greatest fiction, was read three times by Scott and three times by Byron who wrote to Lady Blessington that:

There is a quaint humour and observance of character in his novels that interest me very much, and when he chooses to be pathetic he fools one to his best. I assure you 'The Entail' beguiled me of some portion of watery humours, yclept tears, 'albeit unused to the melting mood.'

Of this same novel, Dr Carruthers, the editor of the Inverness Courier, wrote with reference to the inimitable Grizzy Hypel, otherwise Leddy Grippy, the chief character in it: -

What exquisite delight she must have afforded our biographer, as coyly and by reluctant degrees her various charms of character unfolded to his imagination! We have her in all relations – from a blooming bride to a reverend grandmother; but 'age cannot wither her.' Our author's fancy seems to have run riot with Grizzy Hypel, and he has ransacked every element to find some name and appropriate attribute to adorn this pet heroine, till she comes at last a perfect counterpart of the lovers of Apelles – a thing compounded of every creature's best.

Christopher North revelled in characteristically boisterous praise of Galt's work, and Dr. Moir ('Delta') who paid Galt the sincerest compliment of all by imitating his style and choice of subject in 'Mansie Wauch,' wrote thus of 'Sir Andrew Wylie' and 'The Entail' :-

He has shown great ingenuity and readiness in keeping up that sort of interest which arises from accumulation and complication of incident, as well as exhibiting truth and originality of portraiture... Claud Walkinshaw and Witty the Natural are each in his way inimitable, and leave on the mind an impress not easy of obliteration and old Leddy Grippy was pronounced by Lord Byron as surpassed for truth, nature, and no female character since the days of Shakespeare. The Earl of Blessington had a series of pictures painted from scenes in this very striking work; and his copy of the book, which was lent to the author of 'Childe Harold,' then resident in Venice, was rendered peculiarly valuable from the number of marginal annotations in the handwriting of the noble poet. 'The Provost' may exhibit some bolder sketching, and

it may contain some deeper touches of pathos, as well as some more ethereal flashes of imagination, but as a whole, 'The Entail' is Mr. Galt's greatest and most successful work. We are delighted at once with its truthful observations, its *naturweld*, its pathos, its descriptive prose – witness the storm on the north coast – and with the fine feeling of nature that pervades it, as well as the ingenious adaptation of its parts.

### *Personalia*

The author on whose work these eulogies were pronounced was born at Irvine, in Ayrshire, on May 2nd 1779. His father was skipper of a West Indiaman, and is spoken of as a kind and genial man. His mother appears to have been a woman of strong personality, with what her son describes as a 'relish for the ridiculous' and 'incomparable occasional Scottish phraseology.' She was shocked at his 'love of reading and inactive habits,' and doubtless often gave expression to the opinion of him which he himself reflects in the character of Colin Mavis, the parish poet of Dalmailing ('Annals of the Parish,' 42nd chapter). Colin is described as:

*A long soople laddie, who, like all bairns that grow fast and tall, had but little smeddum. He could not be called a dolt, for he was observant and thoughtful, and given to making sagacious questions; but there was a sleepiness about him, especially in the kirk, and he gave, as the master said, but little application to his lessons, so that folk thought that he would turn out a sort of gaunt-at-the-door, more mindful of meat than of work. He was, however, a good-natured lad.*

The good minister who is supposed to be writing 'The Annals' secures for Colin a post in a merchant's office,

*Where to the surprise of everybody, he proved a wonderful eydent and active lad, and, from less to more, has come at the head of all the clerks, and deep in the confidentials of his employers. But though this was a great satisfaction to me, and to th widow woman his mother, it somehow was not so much to the rest of the parish, who seemed, as it were, angry that poor Colin had not proved himself such a dolt as they had expected and foretold... He has since put out a book, whereby he has angered all those that had foretold he would be a do-nae-good.*

Galt was in his early twenties when his first production appeared in Constable's *Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Greenock Advertiser*. In 1804, when he was 25, tall, broad shouldered, dark, and keen, he left Greenock and went to London, with numerous letters of introduction and the manuscript of 'The Battle of Largs,' an epic descriptive of the invasion of Scotland by Haco of Norway. The poem was published, but was not a success.

Galt entered into partnership with a younger man, from the same part of Scotland, of the name of M'Lachlan. They were successful beyond expectation; but at the end of three years the failure of other mercantile houses brought them down in spite of all Galt's resource and courage.

He then entered at Lincoln's Inn, and a visit to Oxford suggest a Life of Cardinal Wolsey, of which two editions appeared (1812 and 1817)

### *Byron and Galt.*

Having little prospect of being called to the bar for some time, and still less knowledge of where he was to secure briefs, being, for all the alleged Scots clannishness, without friends likely to employ him, he undertook a private embassy to Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor, from which British commerce had been shut out. This was in 1809-10 and in the course of the voyage he met Byron and his friend Hobhouse.

Galt has no very favourable account to give of the poet, who was still young enough to be concerned about his dignity. They met again when Galt was returning from his varied and adventurous journey, and were rather more intimate on the second and subsequent meetings. Galt was later to publish a 'Life of Lord Byron' (1830). The explanation of how they did not attain a thoroughly friendly relationship was afterwards generously explained by the poet himself. Writing to the Countess of Blessington in returning her copy of 'The Entail,' as already mentioned, he said:

*When I knew Galt years ago I was not in a frame of mind to form an impartial opinion of him. His mildness and equanimity struck me even then; but, to say the truth, his manner had not deference enough for my then aristocratical taste, and finding I could not awe him into respect sufficiently profound for my sublime self, either as a peer or as an author, I felt a little grudge towards him which has now completely worn off.*

This is a very pleasant reading for the sake of Galt and Byron. Reading Galt's 'Autobiography' – an unsatisfactory book, reluctantly written when he was out of humour and fortune, as a means of raising money and on the solicitation of a publishing firm – one begins to harbour a suspicion that Galt's misfortunes arose from a certain touchiness on his part. He is transparently honest; but he seems to have rubbed up against a series of singularly perverse and ill-conditioned people, and the mere narrative of his treatment at the hands of these undesirables begets the feeling that the faults could not, surely, have been all on one side. This, however, appears to be an unfair assumption, which is contradicted by the testimony of those who knew him. The facts of his narrative are borne out from other quarters, and as Mr Baillie MacDonald says, in commenting on Galt's experiences, 'what need to apologise on behalf of Samson for the number and the behaviour of the Philistines?' That indeed! The perfectly just, frank, and sincere man of exceptional ability and originality will often have a bad time of it in a world where *finesse* bears the bell as against straightforward merit. Add to this the dislike or distrust felt towards the literary character.

Galt's southern journey found record in 'Voyages and Travels in the years 1809, 1810 and 1811,' published in 1812, and in 'Letters from the Levant' issued the following year.

But in spite of his professions belittling of literary work, which he always placed subordinate to 'business,' these two books did not represent the sole literary output at this time. The year 1812 saw the publication also of the four tragedies, 'Maddalaw, Agamemnon, Lady MacBeth, Antonia and Clyemnaestra,' as well as biographies of Admirals Hawke, Byron, and Rodney; and in this same year he became editor of the

#### *Political Review.*

Over his Canadian experiences one would hurry rapidly. The company which sent him out was less concerned about doing good in Canada than about its own dividends, whereas Galt regarded himself as a pioneer of civilization, and instead of jobbing profitably in land and making much money for the absentee proprietors, he was scrupulously fair and kind to settlers, and made excellent foundational arrangements which bore fruit in the subsequent course of events, in which his son Sir Thomas Galt bore an honourable part. His reception in Canada was marked from the outset by misunderstandings which it is impossible to see how he could have avoided. At the end of three years he returned to London considerably the loser by the time he had spent in Upper Canada. It is with the man of letters we have to do here.

### *Galt and Sir Walter.*

Galt is sometimes spoken of as an imitator of Scott. They were both Scotsmen, they were contemporaries, Galt was Sir Walter's enthusiastic admirer, and his frequent references to the Great Magician show that Scott was very much in Galt's mind. But except that Scottish life and character were largely the themes of both, their types of mind were widely different. Scott was a romanticist, living very much in the past, a collector of old armour and weapons, an aristocrat claiming kin with the Duke of Buccleuch, a poet abandoning himself to reverie over old buildings, and treating his characters with rapid, graphic objectivity. His Mortons and Waverles are figures in a stirring pageant rather than highly individualised human beings with whom we get into intimate touch. Indeed, Scott did not get very closely in touch with them himself. He was not enamoured of his rather wooden heroes. He referred to young Waverley as 'a sneaking piece of imbecility,' and declared that if Flora M'Ivor had married him she would have put him down on the mantelpiece as did the wife of the Polish dwarf Count Borrolanski.

Nothing of all this applies to Galt. He lived very much in the present and always had an eye to business. Visiting glorious Rouen – then, as Morris says, 'a veritable piece of the middle ages' – Galt could not find 'anything in the antiquities of the city to me particularly interesting.' What he was interested in was the cotton industry in the suburb of Deville. As a youth wandering among the hills behind Greenock he evolved plans for bringing additional water supplies to the town. And he describes how a sandbank in the firth opposite Greenock engaged his attention. He explains that the bank was often dry at low water, and he had a cheap and feasible plan for making arable land of it, but that it belonged to the Crown, and was too sacred to be improved. Here speaks the ingenious, practically minded man who in after years was to found the Canadian town of Guelph, cutting through the primitive forest an avenue over seven miles long and two hundred feet wide, through trees standing about 130 feet on either side. Sir Walter makes a trip to the Shetlands, and his impressions and speculations take shape in 'The Pirate.' Galt crosses the Atlantic four times and does not seem to have been at all moved by the extended experience of the long and adventurous voyage of those days.

Galt did, indeed, write historical novels. 'Rothelan' (1824) deals with the reign of Edward III; 'The Spaewife' (1823) relates to the time of James I; 'Ringan Gilhaize' (1823) is a story of the Covenanters; and 'The Wandering Jew, or Travels and Observations of Hareach the Prolonged' (1820) has the largest of all historical canvases. But these are later writings, whose subjects are suggested, we feel, by the success of Sir Walter in historical fields.

### *Galt's Chosen Field.*

Galt's chosen period is the time just preceding his own, his locality the west country, his characters the humble folk of the little towns in which his boyhood and youth had been spent. The 'Annals of the Parish of Dalmailing,' though not published till 1822, was written nine years previous – that is to say, in 1813, a year before the appearance of 'Waverley' the first of Sir Walter's novels. The previous year there had been published in *Blackwood's Magazine* 'The Ayrshire Legatees,' a story told in a series of letters from the Rev Dr. Pringle, his wife, son, and daughter, who have inherited a fortune from a cousin, an Indian colonel, and who go up to London to see to the business in connection with the inheritance. The success of these letters as pourtrayals of the character of the writers and descriptions of the parochial types

who come together to hear the letters read, was instantly recognised by Blackwood the publisher, and it was on his recommendation that ‘The Annals of the Parish,’ purporting to be written by the parish minister, the Rev Micah Balwhidder, was unearthed in *Blackwood’s Magazine*.’

The notice these serials attracted caused them to be attributed to Scott. But they have no little resemblance, in style, in topics, or in spirit, to the work of Sir Walter that the hatching of such a theory as to their authorship shows only how little of a critical faculty the average reader possesses.

Galt and Scott have both styles of marked individuality, and Galt’s is really the more marked of the two. But no two styles could be more dissimilar in essence than the hasty, objective, ‘big bow wow’ style of romantic Sir Walter and the sly, leisurely, pawky, minute, analytical style of the realist Galt. Sir Walter’s Scotticisms are unintentional, except when they are dialect speech of the characters. They are the Scotticisms that find their way into the sentences of Scots writers trying to write English but unconscious of the differences of idiom and term between the speech of North and South Britain. From having resided in England and abroad, Galt was probably more conscious of these differences than Sir Walter.

### *Galt’s Style.*

The Scots Galt writes is deliberately and droll-ly unique. To this day no well-known writer has made so much of the Scottish air and manner of expression. The late S.R.Crockett and Mr John Buchan catch something of the trick; but what was a natural turn with Galt, as being the language of his contemporaries, and especially his own ‘droll, peculiar’ mother, is with later writers a thing overlaid and artificial. It is not that Galt wallows in dialect. Far from it. There is broad Aberdeenshire in George MacDonald’s fictions, and some fairly recognisable Lothians in Stevenson. But Galt’s Scots is not local. He has a copious Scots vocabulary, composed, not of localisms, but of such words as will be found in Jameson’s ‘Dictionary of the Scottish Language’ as being in fairly general use.

I am not of those who pretend that there is such a thing as classic Scots. Burns wrote Ayrshire Scots, Stevenson (as he himself says) ‘the drawling Scots of the Lothians.’ George MacDonald and William Alexander wrote very pure Aberdeenshire. Galt’s Scots has little or no dialect in it. Sir Walter similarly avoids dialect. But there is a Scots *manner* of writing, and there are occasional Scots words – ‘galravitching,’ for instance – and Scots expressions, often borrowed from scripture – ‘chambering and wantoning’ occurs to one – that set a stamp of Scottish individuality upon a piece of English writing and Galt has this character to a degree that is nowhere equalled. His best imitator is Dr. Moir in ‘Mannie Wauch.’

### *What is a Kailyarder?*

This is why I call Galt the first of the kailyarders. I do not know that I have ever seen a definition or short description of what a kailyarder is, but I take it the essential feature of the school is its concern with the old-fashioned life of the village or small town where every family had its own garden of simple kitchen stuff and a few homely flowers. An old song represents the younger members of the family as ‘busy, busy coortin’ in oor kailyard,’ and the singer declares:

... I dinna like the love  
That’s written on a caird;  
I’d rather hae’t by word o’ mou’

In oor kailyard.

With the primitive housing of the village community, the garden would in any kind of feasible weather, be the natural place of resort both for 'talking age and whispering lovers.'

This absorption of Galt in the 'annals of the poor' is perhaps the reason why he is so largely forgotten. It was a small and petty life. In the 'Thrums' series of tales we are invited to smile at its absurdities, its gossip, its spying, and the hopeless contradictions of its outlook. A London journalist, misreading Mr Barrie, long ago visited Kirriemuir expecting to find a community of humourists and overlooking the patent fact that we laugh *at* and not *with* Sam'l Todds and Snecky Hobarts. He declared that the inhabitants of Thrums posed as humourists; but the results were ghastly. This was so entirely what he might have expected that one wonders why he went. Mr Barrie no more presented his fellow countrymen as humourists than George Eliot and Thomas Hardy conceive their chaw-bacons as humourists. To laugh with the inventor or discoverer of humour is one thing, and to laugh at unconscious absurdity is something totally different. The simple villager, one foot resting upon the bottom of an upturned pail, solemnly describing what he would say to Queen Victoria and how he would say it, and the simply bystanders solemnly drinking it in, all parties showing that they have no knowledge whatever of what the other world is like, is grotesque enough; but that the characters should be devoid of humour is an essential condition of the characterization. That is what the author means.

#### *No Reformer.*

It is partly because Galt chose this field that he has been forgotten. The annals of the poor make a drab narrative at best, and often the details are sordid in proportion to the felicity of the picture. Where the tale is illumined by hope, a purpose, and the divine discontent that makes for better thing, as in the works of Dickens, Zola, Mrs Gaskell and Messrs'. Besant and Rice, we can read, and enjoy, and sympathise. But from the hopeless, pruposless photograph of the lives of the poor we turn with dull repulsion. It is not snobbery to dwell upon the pleasant aspects of life.

Galt wrote a novel called 'The Member: An Autobiography' (1832) and the same year published 'The Radical: An Autobiography.' But Galt was no Radical. In 'The Member' he reveals himself as an opponent of Parliamentary Reform and of Free Trade; not averse to the manoeuvring and sharp practice by which seats were won in those days; giving steady support to the Government in power; and behaving generally as a 'private member' – that is to say, a man of no very ardent political views and not much of a partisan, but giving his attention to the ingratiating arts which will please his local supporters and advance local interests as distinguished from general national progress.

We know very little of Galt's actual political career. His 'Autobiography' (1833) is upon all essentials of his life exceedingly obscure, and his political career is never once referred to. We know that he was entrusted with the carrying through of a Canals Bill; and that is exactly the kind of non-party, practical measure that we would associate him with.

#### *A Realist without Hope.*

So that Galt is a realist without apparent hope. Thoreau says that to look at Nature with the dry eye of science is like looking at the head of Medusa - it turns the beholder to stone. Something of that applies to the study of the baser aspects of

human nature. As Thackeray studied snobbery because he himself was something of a snob and a cynic, and doubtless became more snobbish and cynical from his pursuits, so Galt pictured the life of small communities because in these lay his great, inextinguishable, unaccountable interests. We are told that even as a youth he loved the society of old women, of whom there is always a disproportionately large number of both sexes, in small communities. It was a queer taste, even for a novelist in embryo.

There is a large-minded type of man who comes from the country, and compared with the greater scale and diversity of city life, becomes more urban than the born-and-bred citizen. Stratford was a small town when William Shakespeare left it to become more metropolitan or cosmopolitan than the Londoners themselves. But the man from a small community too often cannot get above the grave disabilities of a youth begun in the atmosphere of pettiness. Critics have commented upon the tendency of men from little towns to dwell upon the unimportant, and, even when they have travelled, to cherish homely thoughts which the transplanted city man sheds.

### *Small Towns.*

Plutarch has said 'We may reasonably expect that those arts by which men gain glory or profit should be neglected and fall into decay in small and obscure towns.' : Euripedes does not hesitate to declare that 'the first thing necessary for a perfectly happy man is that he should be born a citizen of some famous city' ' and the Apostle Paul boasted 'I am a citizen of no mean city.' If mere citizenship covered the whole ground then nobody should have a look in against the natives of London, Paris, and Rome, whereas Cromwell, Gambetta, and Cincinnatus were all men of rural antecedents. Success is, of course, no test of mental breadth and greatness, since success itself may be the outcome of a certain narrow, cleaving simplicity of mind – the one thing-I-do type.

Anyhow, Galt started out with the powerful backing of the house of Blackwood, and his prestige was ministered to by his Parliamentary career, the ultimate success, in other hands, of his Canadian pioneering , his friendship with Byron, and the absence of competition in the field which he was not the first to cultivate. If in spite of all he is now mostly forgotten, it is not without interest to canvas the reasons why.

### *'Fatal Facility.'*

It is not because he write slovenly English – Scot wrote slovenly English and is as popular as ever. Galt perpetrates such expressions as 'An uniformity of style,' 'Was awoke,' 'An humble,' and the purely English and not at all Scottish colloquialism 'Those kind of incidents.' But the public does not mind, mostly does not notice, that kind of slipshodness.

Nor is it that Galt belittled or even professed to despise literary pursuits. He often wrote such passages as the following: -

*With me book-making has always been a secondary pursuit, arising from a facility in composition. I did then think myself qualified to do something more useful than 'stringing blethers into rhyme,' or writing clishmaclaves in a closet.*

The last clause is not a bad description of what he did do, whether it was his chosen work or not. But it is not necessarily this deprecation of book-making that explains Galt's drop into obscurity. He may have had too much 'facility in composition,' but

we do not know whether or not he could have made his books better by taking longer time over them. Shakespeare's writing was superficially subordinate to his theatrical leasee; but it is hard to believe that he did not put his best into it. Scott professed to regard literature as a cane rather than a crutch; but others tell us that so far as he was concerned it was the legal work rather than the books that suffered from his divided allegiance.

*The Book-Maker v. the 'Business Man.'*

That the making of good books should be regarded as of less value to the world than the work of the merchant or the politician is a view devoid of basis in either economics or sense. The author is a producer of wealth. Instructor, exhorter, reprove, guide, friend, entertainer, he calls something out of the void as truly as does the husbandman who makes two ears of grain grow where none grew before. To every man his *metier* if you please; when all is said the merchant does but send to our doors that which the producer has made elsewhere, he, the producer, being himself both maker and merchant, since he necessarily sells his wares as well as makes them. The legislator at his best does but facilitate production and the distribution of the product. If Galt felt that his writing was merely the 'writing of chishmaclavers in a closet' he did well to be modest about it. But although Burns gave him the first part of the scornful reference – that about 'stringing blethers into rhyme' – Burns represented his own better self when he breathed the aspiration that he might be empowered, for Scotland's sake,

*Some usefu' plan or book to make,  
Or sing a sang at least.*

Let Galt speak only for himself. He put a low estimate upon the calling of the author, and the world has taken him at his word. It has taken him at his word, however, not because the word was uttered, but because the word in his case represented his conception of values, and the conception doubtless found expression in his books.

Other men thought well of their calling and gave it of their best. Thomas Carlyle wrote slowly and with much travail because he was not readily pleased with easy extempore effects. Stevenson, another fellow-countryman, so far from boasting of 'facility in composition,' used to pour contempt on a morning's copious output as 'slack journalese stuff,' and rewrote it better. Dickens, still popular abroad as at home, used to erase and interline every paragraph of his carefully-written manuscript. Tennyson smoked many pipes over a single line, having the critical capacity to mistrust 'facility in composition.'

*Galt's World Forbidding.*

But when liberal discount has been made on the score of hasty writing, we come back to the original drawback to Galt's fictions. It is not an attractive world that he introduces us to. The scheming and self-seeking of 'The Provost,' the still more sordid scheming and petty ambition of 'The Entain,' the absence of any kind of lift or nobility about the 'Annals' or the 'Legatees,' the sly chicanery of 'The Member' may all be very Scottish; but if so they represent aspects of Scottish character which had best be discouraged and lived down. At any rate the Scottish people are apparently not enamoured of the picture of themselves presented in these stories: for they do not read them. And despite the merits of the tales, one cannot pretend to be entirely sorry.



‘The Annals of the Parish,’ by the nature of the case, make more of the bursting of a milldam and the gift of £50 to the kirk-session than they do to the American War or the French Revolution. That is the human nature of small communities. It is the business of literature to correct this absorption in the infinitely little.

Scott’s genius occupies itself with the great events and movements of history, tending to make us better because more understanding citizens. His fictions teach us the relative proportion of things, and we cannot but believe that he wrote of life as he conceived it. If we apply the same test to Galt, we are shut up to the belief that he wrote of the little things because he was the most engrossed by them. Goldsmith, an exile from home, said he ‘dragged at each remove a lengthening chain,’ and the loving care he devoted to the very smallest feature of ‘The Deserted Village,’ his own kindly, distant Lissoy, showed that his heart was there, though his bod, tricked out in garish garb, walked the streets of London, and he associated with men illustrious in literature, politics and art. We cannot but believe that as it was with Goldsmith, so it was with John Galt. The difference lies in the art. The simple beauty and gentle epigrammatic humour of the Irish poet still hold the world in thrall, gentle and simple, abroad as at home. But John Galt is ‘out of print.’ Even the house of Blackwood, with all its command of the market, cannot now find a public for the writer who, under its auspices, had such a vogue in former days. All popular verdicts are not so sound, and Galt may conceivably have a revival; there is a public for work of vastly less merit: but John Galt has had his day, and it is no accident, no freak of taste, no remissness on part of the critics, that have led to his fading into obscurity. Yet he was undoubtedly the first of a school, and has still distinctive merits as a stylist unapproached in the writing of old Scots-English.

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