

A GALT CENTENARY

MARY QUAYLE INNIS

A PROFUSION of talents is sometimes as disturbing as a lack of them, and to dispose conflicting abilities may be as great an embarrassment as to conceal the absence of any. John Galt is regarded in Canada as a pioneer of company settlement, who opened large tracts of Upper Canada and who happened also to be the author of a number of books. In the long view he will appear as the author of at least one book of permanent value, but he wrote also many others, and organized an important land company. Traveller, promoter, business man, writer of epics and tragedies, he lives by the light of a simple narrative of Scottish life, composed long after he had left Scotland and published long after it had been rejected and laid aside.

At twenty-five, John Galt set out, like many another ambitious young Scotsman, on the hopeful road to London, with no other equipment than a pile of letters of introduction and an epic of his own composition on the Battle of Largs. He had grown up at Irvine and Greenock, a delicate, precociously literary boy, who had served for some time as clerk in a mercantile house. All his life he was torn between literary and commercial ventures. He wrote, "Notwithstanding I have put together many books, and become so various an author, it has been rather in consequence of the want of active engagements than from a predominant predilection for the art. It has only been when I had nothing else to do that I have had recourse to these secondary pursuits." Yet something very like a "predominant predilection for the art" is surely evident in the persistence with which, through all his vicissitudes, he continued to write to the very end of his life.

From a clerkship he turned to the study of law. Then, to recover his health, he went abroad, and at Gibraltar met Lord Byron, whom he accompanied on a part of the tour which produced the first and second cantos of *Childe Harold*. He was absent for three years, travelling as far as Constantinople and producing by the way a number of poems and dramas. On his return, instead of resuming the study of law, he wrote *Voyages and Travels* (1812) and *Letters from the Levant*, both of which

were well received. There followed other spasmodic and unsuccessful commercial ventures, and a stream of poems, novels and biographies.

There was a childlike impulsiveness and uncontrolled energy in the working of John Galt's mind. A visit to Oxford launched him on a *Life of Cardinal Wolsey*; a reading of the works of Alfieri on a series of dramas—*Agamemnon*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Clytemnestra*. He flung himself upon each new piece of work, ambitious, full of ideas, but lacking patience and the power of selection. He wrote in regard to his plays, "I think it would be easier to write others than to make these more worthy of perusal by any application which I might exert."

His Annals of the Parish was undertaken in the summer of 1813. "When very young, I wished to write a book that would be for Scotland what the *Vicar of Wakefield* is for England, and very early began to observe and to conjecture in what respects the minister of a rural parish differed from the general inhabitants of the country. The original of Micah Balwhidder was minister of Saltcoats in my youth; I never saw him, though from boyhood intimate with members of his family." "I never slept but one night in a manse." "It was not till after my marriage that I altered my plan into the *Annals of the Parish*; nor did I then quite complete it, as I was informed that Scottish novels would not succeed (*Waverley* was not then published); and in consequence I threw the manuscript aside."

The apparent failure of his excursion into Scottish life discouraged him, and Galt returned to his literary hackwork. In 1818 he went to live for a time near Greenock, but the next year he was again in London, turning out school texts and books of travel under his own name and several pseudonyms. The year 1820, at last, brought him not only the connection with Canada which was to play such a vital part in his life, but recognition as a writer of fine and sound work. He was past forty, the father of a family, he had written much, travelled widely and taken part in a variety of enterprises. Now came his introduction to William Blackwood, the Edinburgh publisher, who was to be the means of his realizing a lasting success.

Since Galt had laid away his Scottish manuscript, rejected by Constable because no one would read Scottish novels, *Waverley* had flamed through the literary sky, and Scottish novels were being read by all the world. Galt wrote a series of sketches which were published by Blackwood as *The Ayrshire Legatees*.

This was a success, and Galt searched out the *Annals of the Parish*, which was accepted also. Many novels followed, some of them Scottish, and from the year 1820 Galt was increasingly absorbed in the affairs of the Canada Company. He was to write much more after the disastrous termination of his personal connection with Canada, clouded by business anxieties and broken in health, till his death in 1839. But for us he is the author of the immortal *Annals*, which is a kind of happy distillation of all that was best in the author's restless life and impetuous mind.

"To myself it has ever been a kind of treatise on the history of society in the West of Scotland during the reign of King George the Third; and when it was written, I had no idea it would ever have been received as a novel." Never was a treatise more delectably dressed. Tender, humorous and serene, it stands apart from most of Galt's other work, perhaps because it was grounded on his remarkably detailed recollections of his early surroundings and the people he knew as a child. It would be possible to read the book for the sheer interest of its happenings, for though it has no plot, it has many continuous threads to draw forward the reader's attention. The ministry of Micah Balwhidder in Dalmailing (Dreghorn) was co-extensive with the reign of George III, and its story is told by years, so that well-known characters appear, develop and grow old, events unfold and ripen with a vivid semblance of reality.

Perhaps the strongest thread is the story of the saintly widow Malcolm and the growth of her five children, especially Charlie, coming back from the West Indies with his parrot and a present of "six beautiful yellow limes" for the minister. There are the commercial ventures and private storms of the passionate Mr. Cayenne, the American loyalist, and the domestic experiences of Mr. Balwhidder himself and his three wives. Or the book might be enjoyed for the various and authentic characters it presents, such as Lady Macadam, "the old light-headed lady", and "that indefatigable engine of industry, the second Mrs. Balwhidder". There is constant pleasure, too, in the exquisite language in which the book is written, colloquial in the best sense, direct, sincere and tender. For its naturalness it was widely regarded as an old minister's actual recollections, but few men at any time have written at once so simply and so beautifully. "It was between the day and dark, when the shuttle stands still till the lamp is lighted." "We sat, as it

were, in a lown and pleasant place, beholding our prosperity, like the apple-tree adorned with her garlands of flourishes in the first fair mornings of the spring." There is a coloured sharpness in his style too. When Lord Eaglesham was shot, "The hedges where the funeral was to pass were clad with weans, like bunches of hips and haws, and the kirkyard was as if all its own dead were risen." Old Mr. Balwhidder, "not being gifted with the power of a kirk-filling eloquence", had a deep gift of sympathy and no small fund of humour. "One of our cows (Mrs. Balwhidder said, after the accident, it was our best, but it was not so much thought of before) fell in coming from the glebe to the byre and broke its two hinder legs."

Setting aside, however, its other aspects, we may regard the book for what Galt intended it to be—a saga of economic change. Clapham called it the best economic history ever written. For here economic change appears in its close and accurate relation to social life; we feel through the eyes and ears of the people of Dalmailing the repercussions of the American rebellion, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the effects of improvements in transportation, the advance of popular education, the Industrial Revolution. All these appear, not as movements or theories, but as changes in the life of Rab Rieckerton who enlisted in the Scotch Greys, and Mr. Cayenne, the mill owner. The words "advance of popular education" are informed with life when we read of "A well-penned inscription written by a weaver lad that works for his daily bread. Such a thing would have been a prodigy at the beginning of my ministry". And this of the year 1777—"A wonderful interest was raised among us all to hear of what was going on in the world; insomuch, that I myself was no longer contented with the relation of the news of the month in the *Scots Magazine*, but joined with my father-in-law, Mr. Kibbock, to get a newspaper twice-a-week from Edinburgh. As for Lady Macadam, who being naturally an impatient woman, she had one sent to her three times a week from London, so that we had something fresh five times every week; and the old papers were lent out to the families who had friends in the wars." In 1802, "I read the papers at this period daily."

In 1761, the year after Mr. Balwhidder came to his charge: "The great smuggling trade corrupted all the west coast.—The tea was going like the chaff, the brandy like well-water, and the wastrie of all things was terrible.—I preached sixteen times from the text 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,'"

Surreptitious tea drinking became a common evil. "I heard his (Thomas Thorl's) wife, and two or three other earlins, with their Bohea in the inside of the hedge, and no doubt but it had a lacing of the conek (cognac), for they were all cracking like pen-guns. But I gave them a sign, by a loud host, that Providence sees all, and it skailed the bike; for I heard them, like guilty creatures, whispering and gathering up their truck-pots and trenchers, and cowering away home." But only a year later Mrs. Malcolm began to sell tea, and "I am bound to say that although I never could abide the smuggling, both on its own account and the evils that grew therefrom to the country side, I lost some of my dislike to the tea after Mrs. Malcolm began to traffic in it, and we then had it for breakfast in the manse as well as in the afternoon."

The familiar diet was further augmented:

By the opening of new roads, and the traffic thereon with carts and carriers, and by our young men that were sailors going to the Clyde, and sailing to Jamaica and the West Indies, heaps of sugar and coffee-beans were brought home, while many, among the hailstocks and cabbages in their yards, had planted groset and berry bushes; which two things happening together, the fashion to make jam and jelly, which hitherto had been only known in the kitchens and confectionaries of the gentry, came to be introduced into the clachan. All this, however, was not without a plausible pretext; for it was found that jelly was an excellent remedy for a cough, or a cold, or a shortness of breath. In the berry time, there was no end to the borrowing of her (Mrs. Balwhidder's) brass-pan to make jelly and jam, till Mrs. Toddy of the Cross-Keys bought one, which, in its turn, came into request, and saved ours.

By 1767 "the spirit of arm began to get the upper hand of the spirit of smuggling, and the coal-heughs that had been opened in the Douray now brought a pour of money in upon us." The road through the village was narrow and crooked, full of "many big stones", so that the coal carts were often in difficulty, but nothing was done to improve it till Lord Eagle-sham's carriage overturned. Then a new road was made with "steadings feued off on each side according to a plan that was laid down". Twenty years later a new road was made to the cotton-mills, "and there was a stagecoach set up thrice every week from Ayr, that passed through the town, by which it was possible to travel to Glasgow between breakfast and dinner time, a thing that could not, when I came to the parish, have been thought within the compass of man". "It enabled Mrs.

Balwhidder to send a basket of her fresh butter into the Glasgow market, by which, in the spring and fall of the year, she got a great price; for the Glasgow merchants are fond of excellent eatables, and the payment was aye ready money." Also a Saturday market was opened in Dalmailing, and when her children came for an unexpected visit, "Mrs. Malcolm bought in the market for the dinner that day both mutton and fowls, such as twenty years before could not have been got for love or money on such a pinch."

The cotton mill was built by a Glasgow company, with Mr. Cayenne as manager:

The whole country side was stirring with new life. For, when the mill was set agoing, he got weavers of muslin established in Cayenneville; and, shortly after, he brought women all the way from the neighbourhood of Manchester in England, to teach the lassie bairns in our old clachan tambouring. . . The minds of men were excited to new enterprises; a new genius, as it were, had descended upon earth, and there was an erect and outlooking spirit abroad that was not to be satisfied with the taciturn regularity of ancient affairs.—In the midst of all this commercing and manufacturing, I began to discover signs of decay in the wonted simplicity of our country ways. Among the cotton-spinners and muslin weavers of Cayenneville were several unsatisfied and ambitious spirits, who clubbed together and got a London newspaper to the Cross-Keys, where they were nightly in the habit of meeting and debating about the affairs of the French, which were then gathering to a head.

An inn had been opened, a book shop was established, a doctor set up his practice in Cayenneville. In 1793 "The whole year was spent in great uneasiness, and the proclamation of the war was followed by an appalling stop in trade. We heard of nothing but failures on all hands.—It was a sore thing to hear of so many breakings, especially of old respected merchants." A company of Quakers preached in Thomas Thacker's barn, and a "gang of playactors" hired the same building "for their enchantments".

It would be difficult to equal this comment on the effects of the growth of a community, written of the year 1801: "It is often to me very curious food for meditation, that as the parish increased in population, there should have been less cause for matter to record. Things that in former days would have occasioned great discourse and cogitation are forgotten with the day in which they happen; and there is no longer that searching into personalities which was so much in vogue during

the first epoch of my ministry, which I reckon the period before the American war."

Transportation, we say, has made the world very small, and we regard this as a recent happening. It was apparent to John Galt a hundred and twenty-five years ago, and his summary lights up the history of a thousand communities far removed from Dalmailing:

Through all the wars that have raged from the time of the King's accession to the Throne, there has been a gradually coming nearer and nearer to our gates, which is a very alarming thing to think of. In the first, at the time he came to the Crown, we suffered nothing. Not one belonging to the parish was engaged in the battles thereof; and the news of the victories, before they reached us, which was generally by word of mouth, were old tales. In the American war, as I have related at length, we had an immediate participation; but those that suffered were only a few individuals, and the evil was done at a distance, and reached us not until the worst of its effects were spent. And during the first term of the present contest—although, by the offswarming of some of our restless youth we had our part and portion in common with the rest of the Christian world, yet still there was at home a great augmentation of prosperity, and everything had thriven in a surprising manner; somewhat, however, to the detriment of our country simplicity. By the building of the cotton-mill and the rising up of the new town of Cayenneville, we had intromitted so much with the concerns of trade that we were become a part of the great web of commercial reciprocities, and felt in our corner and extremity every touch or stir that was made on any part of the texture.