

PART I

Personal

CHAPTER I

*Biography**Clive Probyn*

Writers whose business is with the here and now of their contemporary worlds might reasonably expect to have a limited claim on the attention of future generations of readers. In Ezra Pound's well-known formula, 'Literature is news that stays news.'¹ Swift's writing, however, *was* topical, *is* universally regarded as literature, and *does* form part of our literary history. After the passage of three hundred years, his work continues to demand our attention. Readers captured (or repelled) by the comic invention and moral force of his writing also wonder, sooner or later, about the author of such powerful works. If Swift was a man of his time, how does he continue to be a writer of ours too?

As an Anglo-Irishman, Swift's writing is grounded in and responds to the condition of two countries and two cultures. He wrote in and about Ireland but also needed a readership at the seat of political power on the *other* side of the Irish Sea, in a city where he would spend some of his best years and where the politics of his career as a writer and as a member of the Anglican Church of Ireland would be decided. London and Dublin gave him a double focus. His English-born spokesman, a Dublin tradesman, encapsulates this political tension in the third of *The Drapier's Letters* (1724) when he pleads, 'Am I a *Free-man* in *England*, and do I become a *Slave* in six Hours, by crossing the [Irish] Channel?'² Three years later, and on his way back to Dublin from weeks of dazzling social success in London, Swift was stalled by bad weather on the Welsh coast: 'I come from being used like an Emperor to be used worse than a Dog at Holyhead.'³ Each country, Ireland and England, was a measure of the other's difference in its literary culture, its agriculture, its roads, its language, its wealth, and its people. Moreover, the Anglo-Irish Road that connected and separated these two capital cities included a dangerous sea-road of 69 miles. Between 1668 (at a year old) and 1727 (his sixtieth year), he made at least twenty-eight crossings of the Irish Sea. Yet none of his English friends visited him in Dublin. His masterpiece, like its author's

life, takes place on and between islands, and, however fantastic these journeys are, they begin and end in the modern city.

As a result of the English Civil Wars and an accident of birth, Swift was born in one of the better neighbourhoods of Dublin on 30 November 1667, seven months after the death of his English father, a steward of the King's Inns, Dublin's legal society. His mother, Abigail, was of English background but Dublin-born. Her daughter Jane had been baptised on 1 May 1666, and when both mother and daughter moved to England, the six-year-old Jonathan was sent to the recently reopened Kilkenny College, 77 miles (124 kilometres) from Dublin, and here he remained until 1681. He was brought up by his Dublin uncles William, Adam, and Godwin, who also supported him at Trinity College Dublin (1682–89), where he was 'more than a drudge and less than an angel'.⁴ He entered at fifteen and graduated in 1686 with mixed results in classical philosophy, Greek, and Latin, and with a record of fines for missing chapel, compulsory roll-calls, and some mathematics lectures. Revolution in England led to violence in Ireland, making it a dangerous place for both Protestants and Catholics alike, so in 1689 he left Dublin for his mother's home in Leicester and for much of the next ten years lived in the household of the retired diplomat Sir William Temple (1628–99) at Moor Park, Surrey, as paid secretary, amanuensis, and occasional emissary to London. He edited Temple's *Letters* and *Miscellanies* and tutored the eight-year-old Esther Johnson (1681–1728), whom he nicknamed Stella.

Swift's first publication of any kind, *An Ode. To the King On his Irish Expedition* (which culminated in William III's victory over James II at the Battle of the Boyne on 1 July 1690), appeared in Dublin in late 1690 or 1691. His first and second books were composed and written at Moor Park and each was published anonymously – the topical political allegory *A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions Between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome* (published in October 1701) and the broader cultural attack on 'the gross Corruptions in Religion and Learning' in *A Tale of a Tub* (published in the spring of 1704). Swift remained at Moor Park until Temple's death, on 27 January 1699, whereupon he returned to Ireland to be instituted vicar of Laracor, County Meath, 24 miles from Dublin, together with the prebend of Dunlavin in Dublin's St Patrick's Cathedral. Stella and her companion Rebecca Dingley moved from Moor Park to Dublin in August 1701.

Swift was now a junior member of the minority Anglican Church of Ireland. His ironic reflections in *A Tale* troubled some of his Church of England readers and may have threatened his career prospects, but

nevertheless his Irish colleagues selected him as the Church of Ireland's representative in London in negotiations with the Whig government over the remission of Irish ecclesiastical taxes. His ambitions included an English bishopric, but the highest point of his church career would be installation to the Deanery of St Patrick's on 13 June 1713. Later, he said, this is where he would die 'in a rage, like a poison'd rat in a hole'.⁵ He regarded this promotion as a sentence of exile, but it was to produce another and very different kind of ordination, as Ireland's 'Hibernian Patriot'. In *state* politics he claimed to be a Whig, but in *church* politics and in an overwhelmingly Catholic Ireland he was a Tory, resisting the English Whigs' policy of tolerating dissent. The Test Act of 1673 had installed a religious qualification for all those seeking public office and was the primary Anglican bulwark against Catholicism and dissent. For such reasons, he added an explanation of his satirical motives in a new and important 'Apology' added to *A Tale* in 1710.

From 1708 to 1713 Swift was at the centre of literary and political culture in London. He had met the Whig writers Addison and Steele in 1708, but in 1710 he offered his pen to the Tories and became their chief propagandist in the four-year administration of Robert Harley (later Earl of Oxford) and Henry St John (later Viscount Bolingbroke). He took over *The Examiner* and wrote thirty-three weekly essays in defence of the new ministers and their policies. To the world at large he offered the immediately successful anti-war, anti-Marlborough tract *The Conduct of the Allies*, and in private wrote the diary/letters to Stella that would become *The Journal to Stella* and which describe in minute detail his life in court politics from 2 September 1710 to June 1713. *Cadenus and Vanessa*, a lengthy poem on his relationship with Esther Van Homrigh (1688–1723), was written in Windsor at this time, and before November 1714 she too followed him to Ireland, settling into her family property at Celbridge, 10 miles from Dublin, where she died on 2 June. Vanessa and Stella seem never to have met, despite both having moved to Dublin to be nearer to Swift.⁶

On 8 December 1713, Swift received his first extant letter from Alexander Pope. The literary Scriblerus Club formed around this time and included Swift, Pope, Arbuthnot, Harley, John Gay, and Parnell. Their collaborative assault on contemporary literary values and styles was organised around a mock biography in 1713–14 entitled *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, published complete in Pope's *Works* in 1741. The Tory wits reigned supreme for a generation and produced some brilliant satirical writing, including Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull* (1712),

John Gay's *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) and *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Pope's *Dunciad* (1728 to 1743) and his collection of Thomas Parnell's poems (1722). Literary insight into politics at the highest and lowest levels did not come to an end with the fall of the Harley ministry, but their demise was the direct catalyst for Swift's exile-cum-promotion back to Dublin. After more than six years of half-life in the Irish public world, he returned defiantly to writing for and about his home country by suggesting an economic boycott of England's trade monopoly with Ireland in *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture*. In his draughty Irish deanery he took up his pen against a background of starvation, failed harvests, beggary, and punitive trade laws imposed by England. At one point, he notes a suggestion that the Irish should burn *everything* that comes from England except its people and its coal. Seven *Drapier's Letters* were published under the pseudonym 'M.B. Drapier' – probably in deference to the Roman tyrannicide patriot Marcus Brutus – and occupied him from March to October 1724, including *A Letter to the Whole People of Ireland*. His consistent demand is that Ireland should be treated by England as its equal under the Crown.

Swift's authorship of the *Drapier's Letters* was widely known. The Drapier's 'effigy' was exhibited in the shops of printers, booksellers, and inns all over Dublin as the champion of Irish rights. A £300 reward for the name of the author of the fourth *Letter* was never claimed, but its Tory printer John Harding was arrested and died after his release from prison. Swift was undeterred. In January 1724, he told Charles Ford that he was already well advanced on the final part of the politically explosive *Gulliver's Travels*, in which party loyalty and the Whig prime minister Robert Walpole were targeted in the figure of Flimnap in Gulliver's first voyage. For speed and security, and to counter the risk of piracy, the publisher of the *Travels*, Benjamin Motte, used five London printing houses to get the book out, and every copy was sold within a week, John Gay noting that '[f]rom the highest to the lowest it is universally read, from the Cabinet-council to the Nursery', although the episode dealing with the rebellion of the Lindalinians (that is, the Dublin Irish) was regarded as politically too risky and was suppressed.⁷ The fourth voyage, to the land of the Houyhnhnms, is the supremely vexing point of Swift's whole career. But he was not finished yet.

His last trip to England (staying for a time with Pope at Twickenham) was from April to September 1727. The death of George I and a disabling bout of the chronic disease not diagnosed until the next century as

Ménière's syndrome forced him back to Dublin via Holyhead, a harrowing journey described in the *Holyhead Journal* (published posthumously, twice in 1882). His worst fears were confirmed by Stella's death on 28 January 1728. His mood was darkening and he laid Ireland's misery at England's door in *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, a particularly bleak commentary. He told Pope that after 'three terrible years dearth of corn, and every place strowed with beggars . . . the kingdom is absolutely undone, as I have often been telling it in print these ten years past . . . I may call my self a stranger in a strange land'.⁸

He then published *A Modest Proposal* (printed in Dublin by the widowed Sarah Harding), arguing that since Ireland could not feed or clothe its growing population it could only survive if it were allowed to practise infanticide and cannibalism on an industrial scale. Language and morality are both eviscerated in what is probably the most famous pamphlet in the English language. In the same year he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Dublin, and in 1735 his close friend, the Dublin printer George Faulkner, published the first collected edition of Swift's *Works* in four volumes, supervised by Swift himself. Only two poems after 1729 begin to measure up to the intensity *A Modest Proposal*. *The Legion Club* (1736) drowns the Irish House of Commons ('this odious Group of Fools') in vitriolic abuse for attempting to deprive the clergy of their rightful income from tithes, and hence of threatening the church itself. The other is his best poem, the autobiographical *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* (1739).

Swift never married, but rumours of a marriage to Stella in 1716 performed in a private ceremony by his lifelong friend and college tutor, Bishop St George Ashe, persist to this day. He enjoyed the company of women, financially supported his sister Jane, advanced small loans to Dublin tradespeople in a scheme managed by his housekeeper Mrs Whiteway, took charge of (and enhanced) the financial affairs of Stella and Dingley, adopted a particular group of Dublin women stricken by disease and disability and enabled them to earn small amounts of money and self-respect.⁹ And he encouraged a 'triumfeminate' of Dublin writers, Mary Barber, Constantia Grierson, and Mrs Sican. His close male friends in Dublin included Dr Thomas Sheridan, Charles Ford, Dr Patrick Delany (biographer and Chancellor of St Patrick's), and his most highly trusted Dean's Vicar, Dr John Worrall.

In August 1742, he was committed to the care of guardians, including Dr John Lyon, manager of Swift's affairs in his last years and a valuable source of biographical observations. Swift suffered labyrinthine vertigo for

his entire adult life ('I have the Noise of seven Watermills in my Ears') and latterly a series of incapacitating strokes.¹⁰ He died on 19 October 1745 at the age of seventy-eight, leaving one of the most famous of epitaphs, still to be seen on the south side of the nave in St Patrick's Cathedral. In 1758 Andrew Millar finally published Swift's *History of the Four Last Years of the Queen* in London, and in his will, Swift left eleven thousand pounds '[t]o build a House for Fools and Mad' in Dublin, 'to show that no nation needed it so much.'

Swift's Dublin superior, Archbishop William King, identified Swift as 'a sprightly ingenious young man; but instead of residing, I dare say, he will be eternally flying backwards and forwards to London'.¹¹ King was right. An enormous ambition to excel as a writer combined with a restless energy, something he called a scribbling itch (citing Juvenal's 'cacoethes scribendi' from *Satire* 7), reflected not only in those twenty-eight crossings of the Irish Sea but also in something even more worldly, as he confessed to Viscount Bolingbroke:

all my endeavours from a boy to distinguish my self, were only for want of a great Title and Fortune, that I might be used like a Lord by those who have an opinion of my parts . . . and so the reputation of wit or great learning does the office of a blue riband, or of a coach and six horses.¹²

His success in the latter is measured by the fact that we are still reading his work.

Swift was a master of the public modes and techniques of his contemporary print culture. The man/author/speaker/subject 'Jonathan Swift' is always presented obliquely, and always as a contested site. The subject of *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* is the posthumous and distorting process of image-building by friends and critics. An unnamed 'impartial' narrator thus clumsily praises Swift for a virtue he would not have recognised ('To steal a Hint was never known, / But what he writ was all his own'). Swift's use of the first-person pronoun screens rather than reveals the writer, but in his private life too there is the same obliqueness. He addressed the two most important women in his life through his choice of nicknames. In the *Holyhead Journal* Stella's failing health so preoccupies him that he tells us to read between his lines:

I shall say nothing about the suspense I am in about my dearest friend; because that is a case extraordinary; and therefore by way of amusement, I will speak as if it were not in my thoughts, and only as a passenger who is in a scurvy unprovided comfortable place without one companion, and who therefore wants to be at home.¹³

His letters to Stella were enclosed in letters addressed to others (literally and metaphorically under ‘cover’) and use a coded language (the so-called little language). His letters to ‘Vanessa’ create a shared relationship of public events and public places and at least on Swift’s part an avoidance of intimacy, most famously in the ‘spilt coffee’ incident at the Dunstable Inn, where they first met on their journey to London in December 1707.

As in his private life, so in his public writing, Swift keeps himself as author and subject at a distance and presents us with a straw man. On matters of Irish trade this is M. B. Drapier; on court politics it is Lemuel Gulliver, ‘Surgeon, and then a Captain of several Ships’, in a text characteristically published in London two months after its author was back in Dublin. In his *Proposal for the Universal use of Irish Manufacture*, timing is all, a boycott of England’s goods delivered on the King of England’s birthday. It is no wonder that W. B. Yeats thought he sensed his Anglo–Irish predecessor always around the *next* corner, to be glimpsed in the process of disappearing, never to be captured or fully identified but whose influence was no less inescapable.

Notes

- 1 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1934), p. 29.
- 2 *PW*, X, p. 31. See Clive Probyn, *Jonathan Swift on the Anglo–Irish Road* (Paderborn: Brill, 2020).
- 3 *PW*, V, p. 205.
- 4 Ehrenpreis, *Swift*, I, p. 70.
- 5 *Corr.*, III, p. 295.
- 6 See *ODNB* entries for Esther Johnson and Esther Van Homrigh; and Sybil Le Broquy, *Cadenus: A Reassessment . . . of the Relationship between Swift, Stella and Vanessa in the Light of New Evidence* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1962) and the same author’s *Swift’s Most Valuable Friend* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968).
- 7 *Corr.*, III, p. 47.
- 8 *Ibid.*, III, p. 245.
- 9 Probyn, *Swift*, pp. 242–45.
- 10 *Corr.*, II, p. 524.
- 11 Cited in his edition of Orrery’s *Remarks* by João Fróes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), p. 96.
- 12 *Corr.*, III, p. 231.
- 13 *PW*, V, p. 204.

CHAPTER 2

*Friends and Family**Emrys D. Jones*

In an era whose literary culture and political language were consistently preoccupied with ideals of friendship, Jonathan Swift can appear something of an outlier. He was a crucial, albeit mostly remote participant in one of the period's most celebrated friendship groups; for the best part of three centuries, readers have hailed the significance and wider influence of his friendships with fellow 'Scriblerians' (principally Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Arbuthnot). Yet, for all that these men were important to each other and were to varying degrees attracted to the notion of a common satirical project, recent work has exposed the relative ephemerality of the Scriblerus Club as an actual club.¹ Close examination of Swift's correspondence shows that, beyond the group's few verifiable meetings in the first half of 1714, he had little desire for these individual friendships to be subsumed within a club structure, and he was not particularly invested in Scriblerus as a pivotal facet of his literary identity. In this, as in other aspects of Swift's social life and his general handling of the topic of friendship, we find a certain resistance: perhaps not to friendship itself, but to the formalisation and public consecration of it. Where Pope would proudly assert his own capacity for moral friendship and place it at the heart of his poetic career, boasting that he was 'TO VIRTUE ONLY AND HER FRIENDS, A FRIEND', Swift tended to be warier and more sceptical in his attitude.² He famously cultivated a reputation for misanthropy that cut against the vaunted sociability of his time, and even in the day-to-day management of his friendships, often complicated by geographical distance, he was inclined to temper affection with reservation.

Examples of such reservation abound in Swift's correspondence with Gay and Pope, often prompting a conspicuous neediness or emotive overcompensation from men who sought greater personal validation in friendship than he did. Gay begins one letter to Swift with a strikingly anxious, predominantly negative framing of the latter's role in their correspondence:

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I have long known you to be my friend upon several occasions and particularly by your reproofs & admonitions. There is one thing which you have often put me in mind of, the over-running you with an answer before you had spoken, you find I am not a bit the better for it, for I still write & write on without having a word of an answer. . . . By this way of treating me, I mean by your not letting me know that you remember me you are very partial to me, I should have said very just to me; you seem to think that I do not want to be put in mind of you, which is very true, for I think of you very often, and as often wish to be with you.³

Despite interpreting Swift's silences and reproofs in as fond a light as possible, Gay seems acutely aware that the keenness and urgency of his affection are not reciprocated like-for-like. He is reduced to filling in gaps, guessing at Swift's feelings and intentions, unearthing partiality in what could more reasonably be described as indifference. Of course, this might tell us more about Gay than it does about Swift himself, but it comes as a natural response to Swift's general distrust of friendship's overblown philosophical currency. In an earlier letter that efficiently addresses both Pope and Gay at once, he comes close to approval of his friends' idealism before directing it towards an ironic, entirely self-defeating conclusion:

I am so far of your Opinion that life is good for nothing otherwise than for the Love we have to our Friends, that I think the easiest way of dying is so to Contrive Matters as not to have one Friend left in the World; and perhaps it would be no ill Amendment to add, nor an Enemy neither.⁴

Swift refuses to be drawn or to let friendship itself be drawn into a self-congratulatory mode. While he does not clarify whether one is to die friendless by surviving one's friends or by discarding them, his willingness to subvert the gravity of the theme, and simultaneously to erode the distinction between friendship and enmity, is characteristically stubborn.

This is not to imply that Swift was by any means a bad friend, nor even that he was incapable of sincere, seemingly heartfelt affirmations of friendship when occasion demanded. In his correspondence with female friends, particularly the letters to Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley that would become the posthumously published *Journal to Stella*, Swift's general cynicism at the state of the political world and its implications for male friendship help, by way of contrast, to authenticate the warmth he feels for those at one remove from politics. 'I am weary of friends', he tells them, 'and friendships are all monsters, but MD's.'⁵ His code name for Johnson and Dingley, generally understood to stand for 'My Dears', is itself a sign that true friendship might need to isolate itself from worldly business and scrutiny. It is surely telling that Swift describes friendships rather than