

**THE WORKS OF  
JONATHAN  
SWIFT. VOLUME XII**

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The Works of Jonathan Swift. Volume XII by Jonathan Swift & Temple Scott

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**JONATHAN SWIFT & TEMPLE SCOTT**

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N 1714 Swift left England for Ireland, disappointed, distressed, and worn out with anxiety in the service of the Harley Ministry. On his installation as Dean of St. Patrick's he had been received in Dublin with jeering and derision. He had even been mocked at in his walks abroad. In 1720, however, he entered for the second time the field of active political polemics, and began with renewed energy the series of writings which not only placed him at the head and front of the political writers of the day, but secured for him a place in the affections of the people of Ireland—a place which has been kept sacred to him even to the present time. A visitor to the city of Dublin desirous of finding his way to St. Patrick's Cathedral need but to ask for the Dean's Church, and he will be understood. There is only one Dean, and he wrote the "Drapier's Letters." The joy of the people of Dublin on the withdrawal of Wood's Patent found such permanent expression, that it has descended as oral tradition, and what was omitted from the records of Parliament and the proceedings of Clubs and Associations founded in the Drapier's honour, has been embalmed in the hearts of the people, whose love he won, and whose homage it was ever his pride to accept.

The spirit of Swift which Grattan invoked had, even in Grattan's time, power to stir hearts to patriotic enthusiasm. That spirit has not died out yet, and the Irish people still find it seasonable and refreshing to be awakened by it to a true sense of the dignity and majesty of Ireland's place in the British Empire.

A dispassionate student of the condition of Ireland between the years of Swift's birth and death—between, say, 1667 and 1745—could rise from that study in no unprejudiced mood. It would be difficult for him to avoid the conclusion that the government of Ireland by England had not only degraded the people of the vassal nation, but had proved a disgrace and a stigma on the ruling nation. It was a government of the masses by the classes, for no other than selfish ends. It ended, as all such governments must inevitably end, in impoverishing the people, in wholesale emigration, in starvation and even death, in revolt, and in fostering among those who remained, and among those whom circumstances exiled, the dangerous spirit of resentment and rebellion which is the outcome of the sense of injustice. It has also served, even to this day, to give vitality to those associations that have from time to time arisen in Ireland for the object of realizing that country's self-government.

It may be argued that the people of Ireland of that time justified Swift's petition when he prayed to be removed from "this land of slaves, where all are fools and all are knaves"; but that is no justification for the injustice. The injustice from which Ireland suffered was a fact. Its existence was resented with all the indignation with which an emotional and spiritual people will always resent material obstructions to the free play of what they feel to be their best powers.

There were no leaders at the time who could see this, and seeing it, enforce its truth on the dull English mind to move it to saner methods of dealing with this people. Nor were there any who could order the resentment into battalions of fighting men to give point to the demands for equal rights with their English fellow-subjects.

Had Swift been an Irishman by nature as he was by birth, it might have been otherwise; but Swift was an Irishman by accident, and only became an Irish patriot by reason of the humanity in him which found indignant and permanent



expression against oppression. Swift's indignation against the selfish hypocrisy of his fellow-men was the cry from the pain which the sight of man's inhumanity to man inflicted on his sensitive and truth-loving nature. The folly and baseness of his fellow-creatures stung him, as he once wrote to Pope, "to perfect rage and resentment." Turn where he would, he found either the knave as the slave driver, or the slave as a fool, and the latter became even a willing sacrifice. His indignation at the one was hardly greater than his contempt for the other, and his different feelings found trenchant expression in such writings as the "Drapier's Letters," the "Modest Proposal," and "Gulliver's Travels."

It has been argued that the *saeva indignatio* which lacerated his heart was the passion of a mad man. To argue thus seems to us to misunderstand entirely the peculiar qualities of Swift's nature. It was not the mad man that made the passion; it was rather the passion that made the man mad. As we understand him, it seems to us that Swift's was an eminently majestic spirit, moved by the tenderest of human sympathies, and capable of ennobling love—a creature born to rule and to command, but with all the noble qualities which go to make a ruler loved. It happened that circumstances placed him early in his career into poverty and servitude. He extricated himself from both in time; but his liberation was due to an assertion of his best powers, and not to a dissimulation of them. Had he been less honest, he might have risen to a position of great power, but it would have been at the price of those very qualities which made him the great man he was. That assertion cost him his natural vocation, and Swift lived on to rage in the narrow confines of a Dublin Deanery House. He might have flourished as the greatest of English statesmen—he became instead a monster, a master-scourger of men, pitiless to them as they had been blind to him. But monster and master-scourger as he proved himself, he always took the

side of the oppressed as against the oppressor. The impulse which sent him abroad collecting guineas for "poor Harrison" was the same impulse which moved him in his study at the Deanery to write as "M. B. Drapier." On this latter occasion, however, he also had an opportunity to lay bare the secret springs of oppression, an opportunity which he was not the man to let go by.

No doubt Swift was not quite disinterested in the motives which prompted him to enter the political arena for the second time. He hated the Walpole Ministry in power; he resented his exile in a country whose people he despised; and he scorned the men who, while they feared him, had yet had the power to prevent his advancement. But, allowing for these personal incentives, there was in Swift such a large sympathy for the degraded condition of the Irish people, such a tender solicitude for their best welfare, and such a deep-seated zeal for their betterment, that, in measuring to him his share in the title of patriot, we cannot but admit that what we may call his public spirit far outweighed his private spleen. Above all things Swift loved liberty, integrity, sincerity and justice; and if it be that it was his love for these, rather than his love for the country, which inspired him to patriotic efforts, who shall say that he does not still deserve well of us. If a patriot be a man who nobly teaches a people to become aware of its highest functions as a nation, then was Swift a great patriot, and he better deserves that title than many who have been accorded it.

The matter of Wood's Halfpence was a trivial one in itself; but it was just that kind of a matter which Swift must instantly have appreciated as the happiest for his purpose. It was a matter which appealed to the commonest news-boy on the street, and its meaning once made plain, the principle which gave vitality to the meaning was ready for enunciation and was assured of intelligent acceptance. In writing the "Drapier's Letters," he had, to use his own

words, seasonably raised a spirit among the Irish people, and that spirit he continued to refresh, until when he told them in his Fourth Letter, "by the Laws of God, of Nature, of Nations, and of your Country, you are, and ought to be, as free a people as your brethren in England," the country rose as one man to the appeal. Neither the suavities of Carteret nor the intrigues of Walpole had any chance against the set opposition which met them. The question to be settled was taken away from the consideration of ministers, and out of the seclusion of Cabinets into the hands of the People, and before the public eye. There was but one way in which it could be settled—the way of the people's will—and it went that way. It does not at all matter that Walpole finally had his way—that the King's mistress pocketed her *douceur*, and that Wood retired satisfied with the ample compensation allowed him. What does matter is that, for the first time in Irish History, a spirit of national life was breathed into an almost denationalized people. Beneath the lean and starved ribs of death Swift planted a soul; it is for this that Irishmen will ever revere his memory.

In the composition of the "Letters" Swift had set himself a task peculiarly fitting to his genius. Those qualities of mind which enabled him to enter into the habits of the lives of footmen, servants, and lackeys found an even more congenial freedom of play here. His knowledge of human nature was so profound that he instinctively touched the right keys, playing on the passions of the common people with a deftness far surpassing in effect the acquired skill of the mere master of oratory. He ordered his arguments and framed their language, so that his readers responded with almost passionate enthusiasm to the call he made upon them. Allied to his gift of intellectual sympathy with his kind was a consummate ability in expression, into which he imparted the fullest value of the intended meaning.