

**OLIVER  
GOLDSMITH,  
A MEMOIR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649141975

Oliver Goldsmith, a memoir by Austin Dobson

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**AUSTIN DOBSON**

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# OLIVER GOLDSMITH

*A MEMOIR*

BY

AUSTIN DOBSON

NEW YORK

DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

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# OLIVER GOLDSMITH

## A Memoir

### CHAPTER I

The Goldsmith family; Rev. Charles Goldsmith, of Pallas; Oliver Goldsmith born there, November 10, 1728; removal to Lissoy, 1730; Oliver's first teachers, Elizabeth Delap and Thomas Byrne; childish characteristics; has the small-pox; anecdotes connected therewith; further schooling at Elphin, Athlone, and Edgeworthstown; adventure at Ardagh; sizar at Trinity College, Dublin, June 11, 1744; his tutor Theaker Wilder; dislike to mathematics and logic; involved in a college riot, May, 1747; gets a small exhibition; disastrous results; runs away from college; returns; writes songs for ballad-singers; anecdote of his benevolence; takes his B.A. degree, February 27, 1749; relics of college life.

**I**F the researches of the first biographers of Oliver Goldsmith are to be relied upon, the Goldsmith family was of English origin, the Irish branch having migrated from this country to Ireland somewhere about the sixteenth century. One of the earliest members traced by Prior was a certain John Goldsmyth, who, in 1541, held the office of searcher in the port of Galway, and was shortly afterwards promoted by Henry VIII. to be Clerk of the Council. A descendant of this

John, according to tradition, married one Juan Romeiro, a Spanish gentleman, who, having travelled in Ireland, finally took up his abode there. His children, retaining the name and the Protestant faith of their mother, settled in Roscommon, Longford, and Westmeath, where of old many traces of them existed which have now disappeared. Some became clergymen, and, during the rebellion of 1641, did not escape the animosity attaching to their cloth. Nor was this their solitary distinction. The maiden name of James Wolfe's mother was Goldsmith, and the Goldsmiths consequently claimed kinship with the conqueror of Quebec. Another and more shadowy connection was supposed to exist with Oliver Cromwell, from whom the poet was wont to declare that his own Christian name was derived. But as his maternal grandfather was called Oliver Jones, it is probable that no great importance need be attached to this assertion. It is more to the point to note that the whole of the Irish Goldsmiths seem to have been distinguished by common characteristics. Even as, in the later "Vicar of Wakefield," the "Blenkinsops could never look straight before them, nor the Hugginses blow out a candle," so the actual ancestors of the author of that immortal book have a marked mental



likeness. They may, indeed, be described in almost the exact words applied to the Primrose family. They were "all equally generous, credulous, simple —" and improvident.

But the further history of the first Goldsmiths may be neglected in favour of that particular member of the race in whom, for the moment, this biography is chiefly interested—the Rev. Charles Goldsmith of Pallas, Oliver Goldsmith's father. Charles Goldsmith was the second son of Robert Goldsmith of Ballyoughter, by his wife Catherine, daughter of Thomas Crofton, D. D., sometime dean of Elphin. In 1707, he went to Trinity College, Dublin, as a pensioner, passing through it with credit. Among his university associates, it was said by his son, was Parnell the poet, and he is also believed to have been acquainted with Swift's friend—"the punster, quibbler, siddler and wit," Thomas Sheridan, grandfather of the author of the "School for Scandal." In May, 1718, Charles Goldsmith married Ann, daughter of the Rev. Oliver Jones, master of the diocesan school at Elphin, where he himself had been educated. Having taken this step without means, and his father-in-law being also a poor man, his prospects were of the vaguest. But his wife's uncle, the Rev. Mr. Green of Kilkenny West, offered the young

couple an asylum at Pallas or Pallasmore in Longford, not very far from the town of Ballymahon. It was a tumble-down, fairy-haunted farmhouse overlooking the pleasant river Inny, which runs through Ballymahon to Lough Ree; and here, while he divided his time between farming a few fields and assisting Mr. Green in his clerical duties, five children were born to Charles Goldsmith — three girls, Margaret, Catherine, and Jane; and two boys, Henry and Oliver. The last named, who saw the light on November 10, 1728, is the subject of these pages.

When Oliver Goldsmith was born, his father's annual income as a curate and farmer, even when swelled by the contributions of friends, amounted to no more than forty pounds. But two years later Mr. Green died, and Charles Goldsmith succeeded to the vacant Rectory of Kilkenny West, transferring his residence to Lissoy, a little village on the right of the road from Ballymahon to Athlone. His house, which was connected with the highway by a long avenue of ash-trees, had an orchard and a pleasant garden at the back. The new living was worth nearly two hundred a year; and here Charles Goldsmith continued to maintain that kindly hospitable household, which his son sketched later in the narrative of the "Man in Black." "His education was above

his fortune, and his generosity greater than his education. Poor as he was, he had his flatterers still poorer than himself; for every dinner he gave them, they returned him an equivalent in praise. . . . He told the story of the ivy-tree, and that was laughed at; he repeated the jest of the two scholars and one pair of breeches, and the company laughed at that; but the story of Taffy in the sedan chair was sure to set the table in a roar."<sup>1</sup> Neither his practice nor his precepts were those which make rich men. Learning, he held, was better than silver or gold, and benevolence than either. In this way he brought up his children to be "mere machines of pity," and "perfectly instructed them in the art of giving away thousands before they were taught the more necessary qualifications of getting a farthing."

In the meantime little Oliver was transferred to the care of Elizabeth Delap, a relative and dependant, who taught him his letters. Years afterwards, when she was an old woman of ninety, she described this as no easy task. Her pupil, she affirmed, was exceedingly dull and stupid, although she admitted that he was easily managed. From this unflattering instructress he passed to the far more congenial tuition of the village schoolmaster, Thomas Byrne. Byrne was

<sup>1</sup> *Citizen of the World*, 1762, I, 104.