Where the Past is always Present

Read by

Robert Smith

Literary Club, November 15th 2010

Ireland, where the past is always present
In songs, poems, plays and stories pleasant
As in Dublin, just by gazing around,
Everywhere, something of the past is found,
At ease, reclining in a Georgian Square,
Oscar Wilde sensed it in the summer air
Heavy scent wafted on a languid breeze
From the Square's old flowering lilac trees.
There's more substantial sign of Ireland's past,
Fine statues, memorials meant to last,
Martyrs, patriots, lovingly preserved,
Glorified, recognition well deserved,
Statues of hated tyrants, blown away,
Removal, courtesy of IRA.
There's sweet Molly Malone of great song fame,
James Joyce, used words as if playing a game,
They are all there. Had I to make my choice,

It would be Trinity's beloved voice.

His memorial I love most of all.

Poet, playwright, twice pictured in this hall,

At Trinity's entrance, poised, deep in thought,

Captured in bronze, he's marvelously wrought,

With notebook open, ready quill in hand,

Recalling mem'ries of his native land

Lines flowing freely, pure, clear, crystalline

Words that will everlastingly enshrine

Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,

Deserted, victim of man's lust for gain

There is some doubt about the exact date of Oliver Goldsmith's birth. Most believe it was November 10th 1728 and his birthplace, a tumbledown farmhouse in a small Irish village in central Ireland. His father, the Reverend Charles Goldsmith was an Anglo-Irish Protestant minister, who divided his time between acting as curate for his small local church and by farming a few fields nearby. He was a kindly man, loved by all and generous to a fault. Although earning not more than £40 a year, he never turned away the hungry nor failed to share his meager funds with those in need. He had three daughters and two sons. Oliver was his youngest. The Goldsmiths lived contentedly as a family in a state of genteel poverty.

With the passage of time, living in Ireland had a softening effect on many Anglo-Irish that eased the tension between them and their Irish neighbors. One of Oliver's female forebears took the almost unheard of step of actually marrying a Catholic and not even an

Irish one at that, but one from Spain, a certain Señor Juan Romeiro. The Señor had settled in Ireland, probably a survivor of the Spanish Armada that had been wrecked off Ireland's stormy western coast following its defeat in 1588 by the English fleet under Sir Frances Drake.

To help dilute the enormity of this lapse, the offspring of this intriguing match retained the Goldsmith name and were brought up Protestant…… sort of. A strong barrier had been broken; new blood had been introduced into what had until then been an exclusive Anglo-Saxon line.

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A Señor and an Anglo-Irish maiden fair
Formed a romantic union.
Hereditary factors combined in that pair,
An uncommon fusion.
Spain and England's DNA happily converged,
Product of love's intrusion.
Thereafter a diff'rent type of progeny emerged,
My clinical conclusion.

In those days Anglo-Irish families sent their male children off to boarding-school in England, if they could afford it. This was to ensure that they would receive a superior education and more importantly they would learn to speak English as it was meant to be spoken. Students from Ireland not only adopted an upper- class speaking accent but also acquired a politeness of manner, the appropriate behavioral skills, social graces and polish expected of a future member of the Ascendancy. The cost of such an education was well beyond the reach of the Goldsmiths. Oliver had to make do with what was available locally and so escaped this elite grooming process.

Oliver was a sickly child and almost died at the age of four from a severe attack of smallpox, which left his face deeply scarred and permanently disfigured. He was often teased and harassed by his playmates because of his facial scars and little girls thought him ugly.

He began his schooling at home, his teacher a Miss Elizabeth Delap, a spinster relative. Under her tutelage Oliver fared badly. She considered him stupid, dull and uneducable. She was greatly relieved when he was transferred to the local village school, a so-called "hedge school". "Hedge Schools" were concealed from the British authorities in fields behind hedges or in disused farm buildings.

Let's do away with Catholic schools,
Keep Ireland a nation filled with fools,
Easier controlled, let's keep them down
So Government planned in Dublin Town.

Reverend Goldsmith abhorred this educational apartheid. He admired the local school-teacher, Mr. Thomas Byrne, who he believed was a fine educator; a kind and caring man who would provide his son with a better education and protect him from his tormentors. Oliver was delighted with the move and his new mentor. Encouraged by his teacher, he entertained his classmates with his fine singing voice and by playing his German flute.

Oliver hanging on the lips of his entrancing new teacher, who had been a soldier in Queen Anne’s wars in Spain and had led a wandering and adventurous life, of which he was always willing to talk……. he dabbled in rhyme. Mr. Byrne discoursed on the Spanish Wars and also on the ghosts and banshees, that haunted the Irish countryside. Banshees are female spirits whose wailing can be heard at night following any death in the neighborhood. Oliver particularly enjoyed the stories of Irish highway-men, especially the great “Galloping Hogan”, a daring real-life Robin Hood, beloved by Irish children.

“Galloping Hogan” fought the English during the rebellion of 1691 and almost changed its outcome when one night he single-handedly blew up the enemy’s ammunition wagon-train in Ballyneety, County Tipperary, on its way to lay siege to the city of Limerick. Hogan with several hundreds of others, known in Irish as “rapparees”, continued guerrilla warfare under the leadership of the Irish General, Patrick Sarsfield.

The following is an old Irish galloping ballad. Maybe something like this was sung in brogue by Mr. Byrne and his students.

Ho! Limerick is in danger and old Ireland is not free

So Sarsfield sends a message to a fearless rapparee:

Come ride across the Shannon at the sounding of a drum

And we’ll blow the enemy siege-train to the land of kingdom come

Chorus:

Ho Galloping Hogan! Galloping Hogan, Galloping all along!

On his saddle is a saber, on his lips there is a song

He’s off to cross the Shannon to destroy the enemy cannon,
He goes galloping, galloping, galloping….galloping, galloping, on.

The rapparee is bearded, there’s a twinkle in his eye,
As he rides into the city, how the Limerick ladies cry;
Mister outlaw, Mister outlaw won’t you please tarry with me
Och, I’m off to Ballyneety for the charge of a battery

To-night along the Shannon, by the pale light of the moon
There comes an eerie brightness just like an Indian noon,
Then clipperty-clop resounding through the lattice of the shade
The ghost of Galloping Hogan goes a-riding down the glade.

Ho Galloping Hogan, Galloping Hogan, Galloping all along
On his saddle is a saber on his lips there is a song
He’s off to cross the Shannon to destroy the enemy cannon
He goes galloping, galloping, galloping…. galloping, galloping on.

Mr. Byrne implanted in Oliver the seeds of Irish nationalism as well as sympathy for the Irish underdog. He also instilled in him the urge to visit Europe and soak up the beauty and richness of European culture, as he had done as a wandering soldier.
Years later Goldsmith remembered Byrne affectionately in his best-known poem “The Deserted Village”. Here are few lines on Goldsmith’s teacher.

"The village all declared how much he knew;
'Twas certain he could write and cipher too;
Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage
And even the story ran that he could gauge.
In arguing too, the parson owned his skill,
For even though vanquished, he could argue still;
While words of learned length and thundering sound
Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around,
And still they gazed and still the wonder grew,
That one small head could carry all he knew.

Oliver eventually outgrew the "hedge school". Happily the Reverend Goldsmith inherited a more richly endowed parish and was able to send Oliver to one of the few Anglo-Irish boarding schools in Ireland. Following in his father's footsteps, he entered Dublin University, also known as Trinity College Dublin, in 1745 at the age of 15, then the normal age for University entry.

Nearly two hundred years later and two years older than Oliver, I took the Trinity entrance examination as he did. The exam included similar requirements in the classics, Horace, Ovid and Virgil. Goldsmith did better at entrance than I did and was awarded a Sizarship, a scholarship which paid his fees for all courses up to the BA level. My scores were not as good as his. I won only a half Sizarship. Maybe if I had started at a "hedge school" with a teacher like Mr. Byrne I might have done better.

Goldsmith spent a good deal of his time lounging outside Trinity's massive and magnificent arched oak-entrance gate watching the world go by, playing his flute and reciting comic verse.

He drifted along
With flute and a song
Was loving and generous
As a student not serious
Pitied the poor and never did harm
Writing ballads of unfailing charm
At home, his family was filled with dismay
Why did he act so, misfortune must come his way.

In February 1749, the records show he was admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Arts at the least distinguished level. His farewell act was to inscribe his signature with a flourish on the glass of his garret window. This was rescued when the building was demolished and is now preserved in the Trinity Library manuscript room.

Thought first of the Church but was quickly rejected
Tried Law then in London but Inns there objected
In Edinburgh and Leiden medicine read
Took few exams, wrote nice ballads instead

He went on a Grand Tour on foot, with his flute
Through Flanders and Tyrol, a tortuous route,
For one year he wandered and when it was over
He's back where he started, a pauper at Dover.

He struggled and strove as a starving hack writer
Awkward and clumsy, but no spirit was brighter
Then rose like a meteor, an astonishing feat
Became the bright star of London's lit'rary élite

Dazzling London, Oliver took center stage
Words simple but captivating, page after page,
Writing poems and essays, a novel and plays
Continually working until his last days.
Nothing he wrote was beyond his range
What brought about this wondrous change?

When Oliver arrived back in England, he wrote home that he was in a country "where being born an Irishman was sufficient to keep me unemployed". He made his way to London where he eventually found work as an assistant to an apothecary. He had attended some lectures in medicine at Trinity as well as at Edinburgh and at Leiden, during his European tour. He compiled a curriculum-vitae which was sufficient to convince Trinity to provide him with a medical qualification but he spent most of his time as an errand boy delivering the apothecary's pills and bottles of medicine around London. He drifted from one job to another and finally began working for a printer. He did well and soon rose to be a corrector of texts. He found this to his liking. He could write with ease and pleasure, foreshadowed by his ballad writing at Trinity. He had found his career and he began to write….and write.

He moved into shabby lodgings in a small square off Grubb Street reached by dizzy steep flagstone steps known as "Break Neck Steps".

In Goldsmith's day Grubb Street was a sprawling slum crowded with hack writers and striving poets, all at the mercy of predatory publishers and booksellers. Oblivious to the noise, squalor, dirt and abject poverty that surrounded him, Goldsmith worked like a galley slave, producing short literary pieces that found a ready market.

With the return of the monarchy a century earlier the English Restoration was by then in full bloom. The writing style of the day made over-use of similies and elaborate metaphors. Lofty diction and classic allusions were in great vogue. A smooth and courteous manner was considered a mark of quality. The Irish "Hedge–School" educated Oliver shrugged off this literary pretentiousness. He wrote with clarity and simplicity, a distinctiveness that captured the attention of the literary critics, ever watchful for the emergence of new talent from the usual mush of Grubb Street. His writing was fresh and original. He followed no standard style or pattern. His poetry was at times light and humorous and at times satirical. He was also skilled in addressing major social problems of the day and weighty moral issues, which he did in masterful fashion.

Most of Goldsmith's early pieces have perished. An example of his satire that has survived is his "Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog", in which he portrays a dog and not its master as sustaining decency in society.

Good people all of every sort,
Give ear unto my song;
And if you find it wondrous short,
It cannot hold you long.

In Islington there was a man,
Of whom the world might say
That still a godly race he ran
When'er he went to pray

A kind and gentle heart he had
To comfort friends and foes;
The naked every day he clad
When he put on his clothes.

And in that town a dog was found,
As many dogs there be,
Both mongrel, puppy, whelp and hound,
And curs of low degree

This dog and man at first were friends;
But when a pique began,
The dog to gain some private ends,
Went mad and bit the man.

Around from all the neighbouring streets
The wondering neighbours ran,
And swore the dog had lost his wits,
To bite so good a man.

The wound it seemed both sore and sad
To every Christian's eye
And while they swore the dog was mad,
They swore the man would die.

But soon a wonder came to light,
That showed the rogues they lied:
The man recovered of the bite,
The dog it was that died.

Among his lighthearted essays is his "Citizen of the World", supposedly a series of letters sent home by a Chinese tourist on a visit to London. He describes an evening at the theatre.

"The English are as fond of plays as the Chinese; but there is a vast difference in the manner of conducting them. The rich in general were placed in the lowest seats and the poor rose above them in degrees in proportion to their poverty. The order of precedence seemed here inverted; those who were undermost all day now enjoyed a temporary eminence and became masters of the ceremonies. It was they who called for the music, indulging every noisy freedom and testifying all the insolence of beggary in exaltation. Those who held the middle region seemed not so riotous as those above them, nor yet so tame as those below……..''.

His first major poem, "The Traveller" dealt with more profound matters. It was his first published work under his own name. It caused a great stir in literary circles. Accolades poured in. Goldsmith had become famous overnight. He was no longer penniless. His first act was to move into better lodgings near Fleet Street, London's great newspaper publishing center. There he was visited by the doyen of the English literary world, none other than the great Dr. Samuel Johnson, who lived nearby.

Johnson was not only impressed by the poem, his admiration went further. He could relate to young Oliver, for he too had arrived penniless in London twenty years before and had begun his writing career in Grubb Street. Furthermore "The Traveller" resonated with his own recent novel "Rasselas". Both works shared the same theme. They described a voyager, one a rich Abyssinian prince, the other a poor wanderer, each in pursuit of happiness.

Each found that happiness depended less on material things and more on an individual's character and acceptance of one's lot in life.

"The Traveller" is a poem based on Oliver's walk through Europe.

He recalled the natural glories of Europe, its mountain heights, its great forests, its sweeping valleys and mighty rivers, its cities, its palaces and great churches and the magical art of the Renaissance. There were also the warm welcomes and more often the cold rejections. For him, the journey provided a great personal, moving and spiritual awakening. His trip taught him many things. The poem was distributed widely and ran to four editions. On a mountain top he contemplated the scene below:

"E'en now, where Alpine solitudes ascend,
I sit me down a pensive hour to spend:
And, plac'd on high above the storm's career,
Look downward where a hundred realms appear;
Lakes, forests, cities, plains extending wide,
The pomp of kings, the shepherd's humbler pride.
Thus to my breast do alternate passions rise
Pleas'd with each good that heaven to man supplies;
Yet oft a sigh prevails and sorrows fall,
To see the hoard of human bliss so small:
And oft I wish, amidst the scene to find
Some spot to real happiness consigned,
But where to find that happiest spot below
Who can direct, when all pretend to know?

Dr. Johnson introduced him to his close inner circle which included the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds and the great orator, parliamentarian and fellow Trinity man, Edmund Burke.

About then Reynolds suggested that the group form a Literary club with Johnson as its leader. The Johnson Club had nine founder members including Goldsmith, who had been introduced by Johnson as Dr.Goldsmith with the following recommendation; “He is one of the first men we now have as an author and he is a very worthy man too. He has been a bit loose in his principles, but he is coming right”. I leave it to you to decide if Oliver would have made the grade at our Club with such a recommendation.

We are proud of our Club’s linear descent from Johnson’s famous Club. A picture of the great man hangs on our wall in this room scowling down at us as if disapproving of our feeble attempts to follow in his footsteps.

Thanks to our Historian, John Diehl and our Librarian Dale Flick, to whom I am most grateful, here are two short excerpts from a paper and a budget brought to the Club over a century ago.

On the evening of October 11th 1902 James A. Green brought his first paper to the Club. It was the first of sixty seven papers James Green brought to the Club during a most distinguished membership career that lasted over 50 years. The title of his paper was “Dr. Johnson’s Lives of the English Poets”.

Green read as follows: “Johnson wrote of 51 English Poets. Many were of no literary significance, minor stars twinkling above the western literary horizon and long since sunk out of sight. This may too harshly state the case. The minor poet is like the annual in the garden and not the perennial and yet the perennial without its annuals would be a sad thing. Though the work is one of the monuments of English literature it is not generally read to-day. It would be a pity if Johnson were known only secondhand through Boswell ……Dr. Johnson poured out the floods of his knowledge and critical experience, lighting all by a humor that never failed….he wrote (of each poet) with perfect frankness and never stooped to flattery. No critical work on English poets is not indebted to Johnson". We possess a first edition of four volumes in excellent condition that now sits on a shelf in the bookcase in this room, rescued from their seclusion in the strong room by our Librarian. Next to the volumes are two related Club memorabilia, a piece of the burnt roof timber of Johnson's home and a piece of the Nazi fire bomb that destroyed the building on the night of January 29th 1942, London's most devastating air-raid. Happily his home in which he wrote his dictionary has been completely restored. On my visit there some years ago I spied a picture of an early meeting of the Club hanging in Dr. Johnson's bedroom. I managed to obtain the negative of a photograph of the picture which I subsequently came across in the English magazine "Town and Country". I had the picture developed at UC and framed at Clossons. I was honored by its acceptance by the Club on the occasion of my first paper, read 28 years ago and it now hangs in this room.

James Green's paper produced a swift response. In a budget presented 2 weeks later by Theophilus Kemper, a distinguished Cincinnati attorney, who wrote; "I kept wondering why it was that I enjoyed it so much and my thoughts went back more than 40 years. It was at Woodward High School and under the inspiration of its then principal, the Reverend Daniel Shepardson. In fields of moral philosophy and literature he was so aglow with enthusiasm. ….in a short time we were so interested in English poetry we obtained works of the standard poets which we read at odd hours in school. Many of us went on Saturdays to his home in West Court Street chiefly to hear him read and expatiate on their beauties and we memorized them page after page….several knew well the "Deserted Village". We wrote short theses on different poets and there is where Dr. Johnson's "Lives" came in so helpfully. That book was a rich mine into which we dug and from which we bore away, each one, what we cared most to use…… we came familiar with the book(s) from cover to cover. Following the paper of two weeks ago I was carried back over a chasm of 47 years and when I consider the advantage and comfort those early studies have been to me I am led to wonder why I did not make more out of them".

108 years ago Johnson and Goldsmith, loved and admired, were brought together and recorded in our Club papers.

"O Tempora, O Mores"!

"O Those Times, O Those Customs"!

Years earlier in 1813 a name was sought for Cincinnati's first suburb, at that time named Key's Hill after its developer, Mr. James Key. On a visit from New England, a Mrs Sumner found the good people of Key's Hill, at afternoon tea, debating the question of more a appropriate name for their village. Mrs. Sumner, a great admirer of Goldsmith helped them to come to a decision by reciting the "Deserted Village".

"Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheered the laboring swain,
Where smiling spring the earliest visit paid,

And parting summer's lingering blooms delayed".

Mrs Sumner had a signboard painted and erected at the corner of Liberty and Sycamore, pointing up the hill and on it the simple legend, "One Mile to Mount Auburn", so leaving Cincinnati with a permanent and indelible mark of her beloved Goldsmith.

Benjamin Rush Cowen a general in the Civil War and member of the Club was also a Goldsmith devotee and presented the watercolor portrait of the poet that hangs appropriately on the wall behind the bar with him gazing down approvingly on our weekly fine display of drinks.

Goldsmith has left his mark not only as a poet with his two great poems, but as a novelist with the "Vicar of Wakefield and plays, such as "She Stoops to Conquer", that filled Covent Garden and still remain popular today.

Oliver made lots of money and spent it lavishly on his friends. He drank and gambled, living life to the full. He loved the ladies but never married. He died penniless in 1774 aged 46.

He had fallen seriously ill and his own remedies only aggravated his symptoms. When proper doctors came it was too late.

Members of the Club subscribed for a memorial in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Later, at Trinity College Dublin. students subscribed for a statue at the College entrance for their most revered graduate.

Dr. Johnson, wrote the following inscription in Latin on the Poet's corner memorial.

Translated, it reads:

A poet, Naturalist and Historian

Who left scarcely any style of writing untouched

And touched nothing that he did not adorn:

Of all the passions

Whether smiles to be moved or tears,

A powerful yet gentle master;

In genius, sublime, vivid versatile,

In style, elevated, clear elegant—

The love of companions,

The fidelity of friends,

The veneration of readers

Have by this monument honored the memory.

Each week our handsome Blue Front Door

Opens, as so many times before

We enter, feelings always pleasant,

Our Club, where the past is always present.

Portrait lined walls, link us with our past

Proudly, our Club, may it ever last.

Down the gavel crashes on the block

Talking ends, silenced by its shock

We listen, some readers make us ponder,
Some entertain, some make minds wander
Only rarely one may snooze
When sedated by too much booze

Our Club's success is oft' debated
"You've changed so little since first created!"
Our critics cry, "Cobwebs brush aside!"
"Too archaic, fossilized!" they chide.

Our Club, I believe, contributes to its members' "Pursuit of Happiness", adhering to part of the most famous phrase in the American Declaration of Independence.

Recently Dr, Carol Hamilton a historian at Berkley wrote on the origin of the wording of that document's most famous phrase. She, like other experts, believes that Locke first used the phrase "life, liberty and property" and attributes to the genius of Thomas Jefferson the felicitous and imaginative leap, substituting of the word "property" with "the pursuit of happiness". Dr. Hamilton asked "who coined the new phrase?" and suggested several sources. Top of her list of possibilities was Dr. Samuel Johnson, referring to his novel Rasselas. I was somewhat disappointed that Oliver Goldsmith was not bracketed there with Johnson because of his poem "The Traveller".

I found the content of Jefferson's library catalogued on the internet and both Johnson's dictionary and Rasselas are listed. Of Goldsmith's work only the "Vicar of Wakefield" had made its way across the Atlantic to that famous library.

We cherish our Club's past, its wonderful collections and associations and its multiple memorabilia and traditions. As members, we take responsibility for protecting them.

Here "the past is always present".

Let's try to keep it that way.