



*Tony Ruane.*

# CAPITAL *Letter*

## Oliver Goldsmith

(1728 - 1774)

**M**y old schoolbook claimed that Goldsmith was born at Lissoy, Pallas, Co Longford in 1728. Other sources say that he was born in the parish of Forgney near Ballymahon, Co Longford, where his father was an Anglican curate or otherwise at his maternal grandparents, Smith Hill House in Elphin, Co Roscommon where his grandfather, Oliver Jones, was a clergyman. At two years of age his family moved to the parsonage, Lissoy, situated between Athlone and Ballymahon, where they lived until the death of his father in 1747.

Oliver's father wished his son would become a Protestant clergyman and sent him to Trinity College, Dublin. Young Goldsmith earned his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1749 at Trinity College but he was not ordained. Oliver disliked examinations as much as he disliked a clergyman's life and he dropped out of Trinity. Later, he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh to study medicine. He also spent a semester or two at Leiden, Holland, but it is believed that he never completed his medical studies.

### Busker

He wandered around Europe and lived on



Statue of Goldsmith at Trinity College, Dublin

his wits, playing his flute wherever he found an audience. He reached London in 1756 and was invited to join the famous literary club of that great talker and writer, Samuel Johnson. Oliver Goldsmith is recorded as being a very likeable character whose freelance writings brought him money, fame and popularity with London's literati. Sir Joshua Reynolds was an admirer of Goldsmith and he included him in one of his famous paintings called "A Literary Party at Sir Joshua Reynolds" 1781. [This painting hangs from time to time at The National Gallery of Ireland].

### Day Job

Oliver held a 'day job' for a time in London as an assistant apothecary in a Medical Hall but he soon left this occupation to become a full-time writer for several London publishers. The combination of his literary talent and dissolute lifestyle led Horace Walpole to give him the much quoted epithet of "*Inspired Idiot*". During this period he used the pseudonym "James Willington" (the name of a fellow student he had known in Trinity College Dublin) to publish his translation of the Huguenot, Jean Marteilhe's autobiography in 1758.

### The Vicar of Wakefield

Goldsmith's novel "*The Vicar of Wakefield*" was written in 1766 and his two comic- plays, "*She Stoops to Conquer*" and "*The Good-natured man*" can be seen occasionally on television or on stage. The classic children's tale; "*The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*" is also attributed to Goldsmith and this title coined an often used and familiar phrase. His poetry flows with beautiful ease but some critics regard him as being superficial because he preferred sweet sound and rhythm, to deep thought.

### Sweet Auburn

The "Sweet Auburn" mentioned by him in his well known poem, '*The Deserted Village*', written it is believed in memory of his brother, may be his native Lissoy or it may be a typical English village ruined by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. I went for a drive one day through Goldsmith Country in a vain attempt to find the deserted village but apart from beautiful, rolling countryside I found nothing bearing any resemblance to Sweet Auburn; apart from a housing development adjacent to Ballymahon which bears this name. I stopped and asked a man dressed in a high visibility jacket and builder's hard hat where might I find Goldsmith's deserted village? He looked at me with a puzzled countenance; "there's no such place around these parts" he replied with a shake of his head. "But Goldsmith wrote about it," I insisted. "I think it was all in his mind" the builder replied, as he returned to his stuttering mixer. Mansions had to be built, it seems and this builder did not suffer fools easily. As I drove away some lines occurred to me from my favourite Goldsmith's poem,

"The Deserted Village"  
by Oliver Goldsmith (extract)

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates,  
and men decay:  
Princes and lords may flourish,  
or may fade;  
A breath can make them,  
as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry,  
their country's pride,  
When once destroyed  
can never be supplied.  
A time there was,  
ere England's [Ireland's] griefs began,  
When every rood of ground  
maintained its man;  
For him light labour spread her  
wholesome store,  
Just gave what life required,  
but gave no more:  
His best companions,  
innocence and health;  
And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.



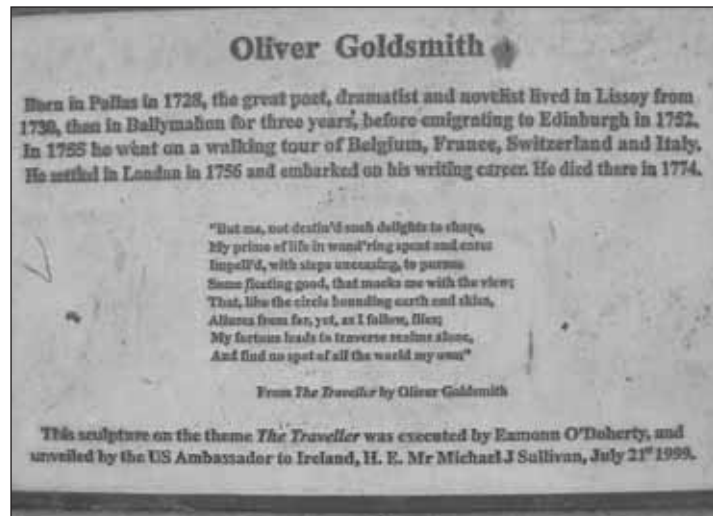
Image of Goldsmith at Ballymahon, Co. Longford

In modern language those words could be as relevant today in the context of the 'Celtic Tiger' that has altered life in Ireland's early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### My Favourite Poem

This favourite Goldsmith poem of mine celebrates the beauty, honesty and simplicity of a rural community and mourns the scattering of its people. In the poem Goldsmith revisits Auburn, a village of which he has fond memories and marks the depopulation brought about through the emigration of its peasant community and the influx of monopolising riches. He bemoans the state of a society where *"wealth accumulates and men decay"* using images pertaining to the land in his poem, he gives to the reader a sense of what it was like in the countryside before modernization destroyed the land that its inhabitants worked so hard to maintain. When the poem was written it was true that the labouring class was in dire distress; changes in land ownership led to shortages in labour and poverty became a common problem; small farmers were forced out of the countryside. Alongside this problem came the new zest for luxuries and possession; poets became enamoured of each situation and accordingly much poetry of the time uses the labouring class and the growth of luxury as a key theme. Thus, it is equally possible that Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* is a criticism of luxury, or alternatively, an engagement with the realities of labouring-class poverty.

In his dedication to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Goldsmith attempts to convey his reasons for writing a poem about the depopulation of the countryside; he is sure that poets will disagree with his picture of the countryside as a place of misfortune, desolation and poverty and thus justifies it. He writes: *"I know you*



The inscription on the monument at Ballymahon

*will object (and indeed several of our best and wisest friends concur in the opinion) that the depopulation it deplores is nowhere to be seen and the disorders it laments are only to be found in the poet's own imagination. To this I can scarce make any other answer than that I sincerely believe what I have written; that I have taken all possible pains in my country excursions, for these four or five years past, to be certain of what I allege and that all my views and enquiries have led me to believe those miseries real, which I here attempt to display"*

*"In regretting the depopulation of the country, I inveigh against the increase of our luxuries. For twenty years past, it has been the fashion to consider luxury as one of the greatest national advantages. Still however, I continue to think those luxuries prejudicial to states, by which many vices are introduced and so many kingdoms have been undone".*

This strongly worded letter indicates that Goldsmith is angered by the effects of luxury on Britain at that time. He finishes the letter on that note and does not revisit the issue again.

Other lines from that enchanting poem go as follows:

(The whole poem consists of 3,332 words and if I presented all of this for publication, my dear Editor would have my life)

#### The Deserted Village (Extract)

Sweet Auburn! Loveliest village of the plain,  
Where health and plenty cheered the labouring swain,  
Where smiling spring its earliest visits paid,  
And parting summer's lingering blooms delayed:  
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,  
Seats of my youth, where every sport could please,  
How often have I loitered o'er your green,  
Where humble happiness endeared each scene;  
How often have I paused on every charm,

The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,  
 The never-failing brook, the busy mill,  
 The decent church that topped the neighbouring hill,  
 The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,  
 For talking age and whispering lovers made;  
 How often have I blessed the coming day,  
 When toil remitting lent its turn to play,  
 And all the village train, from labour free,  
 Led up their sports beneath the spreading tree:  
 While many a pastime circled in the shade,  
 The young contending as the old surveyed;

My favourite lines are: [extract]

"Beside yon straggling fence that skirts the way,  
 With blossomed furze unprofitably gay,  
 There, in his noisy mansion, skilled to rule,  
 The village master taught his little school;  
 A man severe he was and stern to view;  
 I knew him well, and every truant knew;  
 Well had the boding tremblers learned to trace  
 The day's disasters in his morning face;  
 Full well they laughed, with counterfeited glee,  
 At all his jokes, for many a joke had he;  
 Full well the busy whisper, circling round,  
 Conveyed the dismal tidings when he frowned;  
 Yet he was kind; or if severe in aught,  
 The love he bore to learning was in fault.  
 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 e'en 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.  
 But past is all his fame. The very spot  
 Where many a time he triumphed is forgot"

The schoolmaster and the preacher characters are very likely based on real people. As already stated, Goldsmith's father was a preacher; but one wonders if Goldsmith is nostalgically describing in death the father that he loved, rather than the living father that he knew. This seems to be a sentimental poem, which in my humble opinion, the poet commemorates the people and places from a perspective behind rose coloured glasses that hide the faults and intensify the virtues.



Goldsmith Oliver - A Sketch

Goldsmith excelled in his use of the 'Heroic Couplet', that is, a succession of pairs of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter. This style of poetry can sometimes become tiring or monotonous, especially in a long poem, although I do not concur with this view.

(These other lines are currently relevant for someone like me, who has just received a "Free Travel Pass" from the Department of Social and Family Affairs in Sligo...)

(Extract)

"O blest retirement, friend to life's decline,  
 Retreats from care, that never must be mine,  
 How happy he who crowns in shades like these  
 A youth of labour with an age of ease;  
 Who quits a world where strong temptations try,  
 And, since 'tis hard to combat, learns to fly!



Signposts in Goldsmith Country

For him no wretches, born to work and weep,  
 Explore the mine, or tempt the dangerous deep;  
 No surly porter stands in guilty state  
 To spurn imploring famine from the gate;  
 But on he moves to meet his latter end,  
 Angels round befriending Virtue's friend;  
 Bends to the grave with unperceived decay,  
 While Resignation gently slopes the way;  
 All, all his prospects brightening to the last,  
 His Heaven commences ere the world be past!

Oliver Goldsmith died prematurely in 1774 aged 46. His death is believed to have been caused in part by his own misdiagnosis of a kidney infection. Buried in Temple Church, London, his epitaph simply reads: "HERE LIES OLIVER GOLDSMITH". In his honour his statue of stands beside the entrance arch to Trinity College in Dublin and a Lecture Theatre and student campus at the same University is named Goldsmith Hall. A school in London, England is called Oliver Goldsmith Primary School and a monument to his memory also stands at the centre of Ballymahon Town in Co Longford. It is said that Goldsmith was always in debt and addicted to gambling, having a strong inclination to jealousy, as well as being highly disorganised and a hopeless timekeeper. He failed to immigrate to America, simply because he missed the boat on a number of occasions; it is reported that he died in unhappiness and poverty.