

Now languishing in undeserved obscurity, Tobias Smollett should be remembered for his series of edgy novels whose vicious wit, vivid characterisation and skewering of hypocrisy made him a firm favourite of – and influence on – Charles Dickens

# A FORGOTTEN BRITISH GREAT: SMELFUNGUS

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**S**ATIRISED AS “SMELFUNGUS” by Laurence Sterne in *A Sentimental Journal Through France and Italy* (1768), the first great Scottish writer of the Union, Tobias Smollett (1721-71), is now largely forgotten. Unlike Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Smollett’s picaresque talents have faded from public consciousness, and his poetry, journalism, drama and historical writing even more so. Moreover, if he was not so overlooked, he would now be cancelled because part of his family’s modest prosperity derived from the Caribbean wealth, including slaves, brought in with his wife.

And yet Smollett left a series of excitable novels which provide an account of his Britain, one that is shown to be more edgy and problematic than is generally appreciated. Smollett’s scabrous content and often vicious style do not match modern sensibilities, but, as a doctor-writer should, Smollett could see “the skull beneath the skin”. He provides us with a way to offer a reading of humanity in which an honesty of vision is more important than an elegance of illusion.

The trajectories of Smollett’s novels reflected his concerns. Characters who end up in a successful position, with appropriate status, have frequent falls en route, and each is a matter of serious alarm. Indeed, the frequency of reversals can create a somewhat hallucinatory impression. It is not “low life” that face uncertainties and hardship, but gentry. As with Fielding, there is the particular addition, especially in *Roderick Random*, of the hardship arising from a misapplied inheritance, but that only goes to show the very vulnerability of gentry status.

The devious Ferdinand, Count Fathom, by far the most disturbing of Smollett’s protagonists, is referred to as a great “latitudinarian ... in point of morals and principle”. Such a commitment, with the description classically linked to religious preference, would have been anathema to orthodox Anglican Tories who were wary of anything suggesting a lack of commitment. Nevertheless, Smollett’s Toryism was different to that of most of his English contemporaries. He did not really share the commitment to the Church of England of the English Tories, for whom the defence of that Church was a major purpose, and was not interested in acquiring such a pose.

In his career, Smollett might represent Britishness, but there

was no Britishness in religion beyond Protestantism due to a marked lack of sympathy between English Anglicans and Scottish Presbyterians, the two established churches. Arguably, the position of Dissenters in England worked against common Protestantism and (through exposing them to Scottish university education) reinforced their cross-border links and the Scottish suspicion of Anglicanism. As a Scot and a doctor, Smollett was doubly a marginal figure.

**SMOLLETT’S TRAVELS WERE BUT PART OF A WIDE-RANGING** writing career. Although best known as a novelist, he was active in a number of important and profitable activities as editor, critic, translator, historian and pamphleteer. Described later by William Godwin as having “published more volumes, upon more subjects, than perhaps any other author of modern date; and, in all, he has left marks of his genius,” Smollett was a “man of letters” for whom writing was work.

Smollett’s pessimism, at once political, social, economic and cultural, helped give a savage tone to much of his writing, notably his novels and literary criticism. This pessimism contributes to the characterization of Smollett as Tory. His journalism certainly pointed against radicalism.

There was little of the easier confidence of Fielding the well-connected Whig, whose career benefited from his Eton connections, especially with George Lyttelton. Yet, aside from being largely directed against hypocrisy, Smollett’s pessimism was more than a matter of political concern, social panic, and personal disappointment. He was also all-too-aware of the travails of life. Like Samuel Johnson, he had persistent poor health. Unlike Johnson, Smollett had a child, but Elizabeth died young and, unlike Fielding, he had no other children.

Smollett battled life, and these battles left a keen mark in his writings. This was true of both the general tone and of specific comments. Although accounts of his hospitality at Chelsea reveals a great capacity for joy and relish in people, there was no ease and little contentment in the work he produced.

Smollett also reflected his age, as well as his personality, in his gusto and his reach for a narrative of drive, energy, openness and a resolution of purpose. With his medical background, he understood the quest to represent a culture in part in thrall to Isaac Newton but also very much affected by traditional



beliefs and superstition, as indeed was Newton. The understanding Smollett offered was ribald, coarse, harsh, all-too-true, and ably directed against hypocrisy. He was not a writer of cant, and his readers therefore got what they deserved and needed. Would that the same was true for our age.

**HE NEVER WANTED TO FORGET SCOTLAND, AND WAS** never given a chance to do so. Smollett spent most of his adult life in London and his last years in Italy, where he died; but he was a Scottish Briton and showed great loyalty to his homeland. He also had a positive response when he visited Scotland, lastly in 1766, and, accordingly, he sent his characters there. This was notably so in *Humphry Clinker*, in which Matthew Bramble got as far as the Western Isles and praised Scotland repeatedly.

Moreover, Smollett's first work, one he long sought to bring to public attention, was a play, *The Regicide*, based on a dramatic episode in Scottish history, the assassination in 1437 of James I of Scotland.

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Despite much effort on his part, however, it was never staged. In part, this was a consequence of the work's lack of quality. Yet the subject also was of only limited interest in London: this was not yet the age in which Sir Walter Scott's

novels successfully exported a romantic view of Scots history.

In *Roderick Random*, his opening novel, Smollett repeatedly drew attention to English hostility toward Scots. Making Random "a North Briton," to employ a term of the period for Scots, offered him an opportunity to reach back into his own experience, however much he might emphasise differences between his experience and that of Random. He also provided a far more edgy account than that of Fielding's provincial English in London, for example Squire Western and Tom Jones.

Indeed, this edginess is crucial to any reading of Smollett — there is always the sense of an outsider with his protagonists. Of course, the cause and character of this outsider quality varies. It is a matter of personality with Peregrine Pickle, of values with Launcelot Greaves, and of the background of morality with Ferdinand, Count Fathom.

Matthew Bramble was the sole Smollett protagonist who was not really an outsider. It is instructive to think of James Boswell in London in 1762: a proud Scot enraged by anti-Scottish prejudice yet desperate to achieve professional and social acceptance in England. So also with Oliver Goldsmith, an Irishman who studied medicine in Edinburgh before settling in London in 1756. Goldsmith was to work for Smollett at both the *Critical Review* and the *British Magazine*. Both men supported the Church of England and the social order.

**FOR SMOLLETT, THERE WERE ALSO PARTICULAR CRISES** of Scottish consciousness and concern, linked to periods of especially harsh Scotophobia. The first bout arose with Bonnie Prince Charlie's march towards London in late 1745 — he

reached as far as Derby in the greatest crisis faced by the eighteenth-century British state. The atrocities in Scotland subsequently committed by the victorious British army after the battle of Culloden in 1746 fired Smollett's ire, and he reflected eloquently on them, both at the time and later. The opening lines of his *The Tears of Scotland*, written in 1746, declaimed:

Mourn, hapless Caledonia, mourn  
Thy banish'd peace, thy laurels torn.

The *Tears of Scotland* includes some grim language:

The ravish'd virgins shriek in vain,  
Thy infants perish on the plain.

Smollett himself was scarcely a Jacobite sympathiser. Indeed, the Clydeside Lowlanders had rarely had much sympathy for Episcopalianism or Jacobitism and Smollett was committed to the legacy of the Glorious Revolution.

A fresh outbreak of Scotophobia in 1762 was occasioned by allegations that George III was under the influence of his former mentor when Prince of Wales — John, 3rd Earl of Bute (Secretary of State in 1761–62 and First Lord of the Treasury in 1762–63). It did not help that Bute's surname was Stuart. This criticism directly involved Smollett, who, as part of a government press campaign, replied in the *Briton*.

Under vicious attack, Bute resigned in 1763. Nevertheless, the anti-Scottish prejudice continued. A London newspaper, the *St James's Chronicle* of 17 December 1771, complained: "They send us whole cargoes of their staple commodity, half-bred doctors and surgeons to poison and destroy our health." — which given the relative skill and sophistication of Scottish medicine in this period was an especially foolish moan.

**OF ALL THE NOVELISTS OF THE PERIOD, SMOLLETT WAS** the one most concerned with British interests, not least with the presentation of an England that included many who were not English. There was an important measure of linguistic standardisation during Smollett's lifetime, but Smollett's ear for differing voices, an aspect of his skill in capturing sounds and smells, was as impressive as his ability to understand and present the energy and tensions of the times.

A Scots novelist writing from London for a British audience was part of a national cultural energy that towards the end of his life saw the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768 and the Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769. If Britishness was often to the fore for Smollett, it had an important Scottish dimension.

*Humphry Clinker*, his last novel, is a laugh-out-loud book in which multiple narrators provide very varied accounts of the same tour. Aside from Matthew Bramble, a Welsh squire, as a narrator, there is his sister Tabitha, nephew Jerry, niece Lydia, Tabitha's maid Win, and, less prominently, Lydia's suitor, Wilson. Thus, from Win:

O Molly! what shall I say of London? All the towns that ever I beheld in my born days are no more than Welsh barrows and crum-lecks to this wonderful sitty! Even Bath itself is but a fillitch, in the name of God. — One would think there's no end of the streets, but the lands end. Then there's such a power of people, going hurry skurry! Such a racket of coxes! Such a noise and hali-balloo! So



**Humphry Clinker Smashing a Dish at Dinner,** from the 1793 edition, by Charles Grignion

many strange sites to be seen! O gracious! my poor Welsh brain has been spinning like a top ever since I came hither!

Each narrator is very different in tone, assumptions and content, which helps underline the refraction of truth through subjectivity. The approach works well: he writes with energy, his plot rushes along, and his characters are fascinating. As with the letters in Richardson's novels, those in *Humphry Clinker* use diction and syntax to capture social rank and personality, but they also provide aspects of the multilayered humour of the novel, one of plot, characters, repeated interactions, contrasting perspectives and distinctive language.

*Humphry Clinker*, Dickens's favourite Smollett novel, and one much praised by contemporaries, is fun, humane, energetic and a development of the eighteenth-century novel toward a subjectivity that was more disciplined and useful than that of Laurence Sterne. It saw Smollett's writing at its height in characterisation, variety and verve. It is unclear how his work would have developed had he not died that year, but there was no sign of any loss of creative power.

Smollett did not so much lance hypocrisy as launch a full-scale assault upon it, a strategy and style later followed by Dickens, who was happy in the strongly-autobiographical *David Copperfield* to acknowledge his influence:

My father had left a small collection of books ... *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphry Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, *Robinson Crusoe* ... a glorious host ... They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that time and place.

Three of the books were by Smollett and two translated by him.

Smollett's novelistic approach uncovers the realities of motivation and background, and permits a use of ridicule to castigate selfishness. He implies it is the polite who through their selfishness undermine righteousness and thus justify the response of ridicule. Morality was shown to lay not in the language of politeness, but in the action of charity.

**Professor Jeremy Black's *Smollett's Britain* is published by St Augustine's Press**