

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Jonathan Swift

Swift was born in Dublin, Ireland on November 30, 1667. He was the only son and second child of Jonathan, Sr., who died seven months before Swift was born. Swift became a leading English literary figure, political satirist, and clergyman in the Irish branch of the Church of England. At the height of his public career he was editor of the Tory Government newspaper, the *Examiner*, from 1710 until the death of Queen Anne in 1714. He then returned to Ireland as Dean of St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin where he remained until his death on Oct 19, 1745.

The Swift's were a prosperous family from Yorkshire, England. The most noted individual was his grandfather Thomas, vicar at Goodrich when Oliver Cromwell took power in 1653. Thomas had married Elizabeth Dryden, great-aunt to John Dryden, who was, therefore, a cousin to Swift. Thomas Swift's outspoken and staunch support of Charles I lost him his church living with his estate sequestered during the turbulent years of Cromwell. But five of his sons, including Jonathan Sr, were trained in the law. These five migrated to Dublin to seek their fortunes during the Restoration period that followed the reestablishment of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660.

Swift's mother was Abigail Erick of Leicestershire, distant cousin to Sir William Temple, a famous statesman of the seventeenth century. Abigail was known for her good character and wit. After the marriage of Swift's parents his father was appointed Steward of the King's Inn in Dublin, and admitted as a solicitor before the bar in 1665 at the age of 25. Swift's sister, Jane, was born in 1666.

When Swift's father died he left little support for his family. Swift's mother had no private income; she was forced to seek assistance from other members of the family. Apparently they lived in his uncle Godwin's household for some time. His mother later returned to Leicestershire, but the date is not known with certainty.

Under the sponsorship of his uncle, Swift entered Kilkenny College in Dublin at the age of six, going on to Trinity College in April 1682 at the age of fourteen. However, his uncle provided minimum support. Swift's financial condition and dependence upon a reluctant uncle greatly discouraged him. Although faithful as a student he did poorly and was denied a regular Bachelor of Arts. Instead, at his request, he was given a degree *speciali gratia* on February 15, 1685. This rankled in Swift; in later years he remarked that his uncle "gave me the education of a dog."

In spite of this social disgrace he continued working at Trinity toward a masters, which required three more years. But school records show that between November 1685 and October 1687 he was punished twenty times for cutting

chapel and being absent from the college without leave. For some disrespect to the Dean of the College, Owen Lloyd, he was sentenced to kneel and beg his pardon in 1688. At that point his studies were interrupted by “the troubles.” King James entered Dublin in February 1689. The college authorities gave permission to all members to withdraw “for their better security.”

With an uncertain political situation in Ireland, Swift left Dublin to live with his mother in Leicestershire. Some months later they were able to arrange for Swift to become employed as a secretary with Sir William Temple in Moor Park near London.

Swift was back and forth with the Temple household three times over the next ten years. His first employment was accepted as temporary until the troubles in Ireland would clear up. He returned to Ireland after the battle of Boyne on July 11, 1690. However, his fortunes in Ireland were not good, and he was back with his mother for some months, until the arrangements with Temple could be renewed. He then served in a more permanent role as editor of Temple’s papers from December 1691 to May, 1694. During this period he was able to establish residency requirements at Oxford where he obtained his masters in June 1692.

Although relations with Sir Temple were cordial Swift was not satisfied with his post. He had firmly made up his mind to become an ordained priest but, from the records available, Temple felt he should seek a different career. The debate between the two men caused Swift to leave the Temple household the second time somewhat estranged. However, he was not free from Temple. When he applied for ordination in Dublin late in 1694 he was requested to supply a reference from Temple stating his moral and spiritual qualifications. He was thus forced to humbly seek Temple’s assistance, which was graciously offered. He was subsequently ordained as a deacon on October 10, 1694 and became a priest on January 28, 1695.

He was appointed to the prebend of Kilroot immediately afterwards. The church position included sixteen hundred acres under his personal management. The income from the property, and a stipend of more than one hundred pounds a year, placed him in a very reasonable position for a young man twenty-eight years of age.

There he met and fell in love with Jane Waring. They had a short affair together, not very serious, but Swift was at a decision point in his life. He was willing to become a parish vicar, husband, and father. He was also satisfied Jane would make a good wife. However, she hesitated to commit herself. In the midst of Swift’s plea to her an offer came from Temple for a more senior position working with Temple’s estate and household. Temple spiced the offer by suggesting he would use his persuasion with King William III to obtain a higher church position for Swift.

Faced with this offer Swift put an ultimatum to Jane. She did not respond, probably not assessing his intent correctly. Thereupon he accepted Temple’s offer and returned to Moor Park in 1696, where he remained until Temple’s death in 1699.

Jane may have had some justification for believing Swift would not accept Temple's offer. His new position as vicar was not one to be cast aside lightly. But she failed to grasp his determination. His failure at the marriage proposal conditioned his later life. Although he fell in love again, more seriously, he never married, as far as public or private records show.

During this decade Swift engaged in considerable writing, including poetry, but was not successful commercially. However, these efforts, together with his work for Temple, gave him the opportunity to develop a unique style and mastery of words that has since found few equals.

Upon his return to Moor Park he edited Temple's papers while he continued to work on his own material. It is believed that during this period he did the initial drafts on his first two famous works, *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books*.

Swift had not resigned his prebend at Kilroot during his absence and thus was privileged to portions of that income. However, the pressure of the situation forced his resignation in January, 1698. Sir Temple, recognizing the sacrifice to his career, added a codicil to his will leaving Swift a hundred pounds a year above his salary from the estate. While this was not equal compensation for the lost prebendary, it was regarded as a fair reward.

Temple died on January 29, 1699. He had not been able to obtain the church preferment before his death. Once again Swift faced the decision of a career. Swift remained in London for a few months, trying to find a sponsor for the preferment, but was unsuccessful. He finally was offered a position as chaplain-secretary to Lord Berkeley, recently appointed Lord Justice of Ireland. Although Swift had vowed to Jane that he would not return to Ireland if she would turn him down, he did so once again in 1699.

He served as part of the Berkeley household for two years. During that time he published two volumes of Temple's letters and a third volume of Temple's Miscellanea. In February, 1700 he was appointed vicar of Laracor, Agher, and Rathbeggan in County Meath, Ireland with income worth about two hundred pounds annually. On February 16, 1701 he was granted a Doctor of Divinity from Trinity College. It cost him forty-four pounds but he was now Doctor Swift and thirty-three years of age.

With the advent of the Tory government in February, 1701 Lord Berkeley was recalled to London. Swift returned to London also where he published his first political pamphlet, *The Dissensions in Athens and Rome*, in which he tried to show that political squabbles merely deteriorated the well-being of a nation. The pamphlet gained reputation for Swift as a political writer but he remained apart from active politics. He mostly devoted the next nine years to the welfare of the Irish clergy, who were treated less fairly than their counterparts in England. Meanwhile he worked on the *Tale of a Tub* which was published in April, 1704.

The *Tale* was a major work of literary satire. It immediately brought fame to Swift. Although his earlier political pamphlets had attracted attention it was the *Tale* which made him an influential figure. By this time he had established himself as a major figure in political and social thought in England and Ireland.

After publication of the *Tale* he went back to Ireland and did not return to England until November of 1707. The period was one of fallow in his life. Biographers consider this strange. He had recently acquired a reputation both in political circles and among the general public. His gifts and mental energies were at their zenith, but hardly any writings or letters of his have survived from that period. Two poems, some verses on the union with Scotland, a lampoon on a political figure, and a few thoughts on several subjects are all that survive from a period of three years.

Swift's writings during this period could not have been simply suppressed. He was famous by now, and since it was a common habit to save correspondence, it is remarkable that nothing but a few letters survive. He must have been content with himself and simply did not write.

In November of 1707 he was charged with a mission to Queen Anne from the Church of Ireland to solicit an extension of her bounty to that clergy. The mission returned him to London and brought him into contact with the ministers of the government of Queen Anne. However, his efforts on behalf of the Irish clergy were not successful. In the meantime he was busy writing in London. His work included *Arguments Against Abolishing Christianity*, *A Letter Concerning the Sacramental Test*, *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man*, and *A Project for the Advancement of Religion*. This activity brought Swift to the attention of Robert Harley, Tory Prime Minister to the Queen. Harley invited him for interview. The ensuing conversation lasted four hours into a Saturday evening. Harley was impressed with Swift, both by the nature of his writing and his personal conduct. Subsequently, he appointed Swift editor for the government journal, the *Examiner*. Through these connections Swift became intimate with many matters of state.

During the four years from 1710 to 1714 Swift wrote an extraordinary number of political pamphlets. Few political writers have ever produced the volume, brilliance and power which Swift demonstrated during that period. It was a burst of effort which had profound effect on the conduct of the government; it helped shape opinions far and wide. Swift's task was aimed at three aspects of the political environment: first, to show that the cause of the Tory government of Queen Anne to obtain peace with France was just, and that its members were worthy men; second to cast ridicule on the members of the Whig party; and third to restrain the more extreme members of the Tory party.

During this period he also contributed miscellaneous pieces to the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, two major English political publications, as well as other satires on religious subjects.

But Swift did not forget his private affairs. This period also marked daily notes to Esther Johnson, a child in Sir Temple's household when Swift first went there in 1689. Swift was responsible for most of her education and introduction to the literature and thought of the day, developing a friendship that was intimate for the rest of their natural lives. Swift would take a few moments each day to jot down thoughts and events, then send them off to Esther in Dublin every week or two. This procedure continued over the four years in which he served the Tory

government. They became famous as the *Journal to Stella*. (Stella was the intimate name he used for Esther.) When Temple died in 1699 Swift had made arrangements for Esther to live in Dublin with her companion Rebecca Dingley, and provided a major portion of their support. The two women lived in Dublin until their deaths, always close to Swift when he was in Ireland. Although there were many rumors that Swift and Stella were married no documentation has ever been found to attest to the fact. Stella was a woman of clear mind and pleasant manner who became well known and greatly respected. Her conduct with Swift was exemplary, never permitting suspicions to be aroused that their relationship was anything more than close friendship.

The interval from late 1713 through 1714 was also marked by the formation of one of the most outstanding collection of wits and writers in the history of England. Swift formed a group known as the Scriblerus Club. The members of this group included Robert Harley, the Prime Minister, Alexander Pope, author of *The Duncaid* and still well known as a literary figure in our day, John Gay, author of *The Beggar's Opera*, the first English opera, being produced yet today, Thomas Parnell, a poet and wit of some distinction, and John Arbuthnot, Scottish physician to the Queen and member of the Royal Society. Arbuthnot was noted for his analytical mind and rose to prominence in the scientific community. This group established lifetime friendships and their association undoubtedly was a great inspiration behind much of their individual work.

After the death of Queen Anne in 1714 Swift returned permanently to Ireland. He became involved in Irish affairs, especially in preparing the famous *Drapier Letters*, an attack on a man named Wood who had obtained a patent from the Crown to mint copper coin in Ireland at a fantastic profit. The letters were composed in 1724 during a period of public turmoil over the coinage. As a result of the letters Swift became an Irish national hero, although not without some personal danger. The letters were regarded as seditious by English political forces.

According to Swift's correspondence with Charles Ford, a close friend, the *Travels Into Several Remote Nations of the World*, (*Gulliver's Travels*) were composed from 1721 to 1725. They were published in 1726. The *Travels* went through a series of editions and printings until his death at the age of seventy-eight. They have seen many more printings since, and have been translated into many languages. They have been edited into a story for children, were made into more than one motion picture, and were the object of the careers of many scholars.

This brief biographical sketch is intended to acquaint the reader with major events in Swift's life. Many details obviously are not mentioned. I shall delve into some aspects of Swift's mystery in the next chapter.