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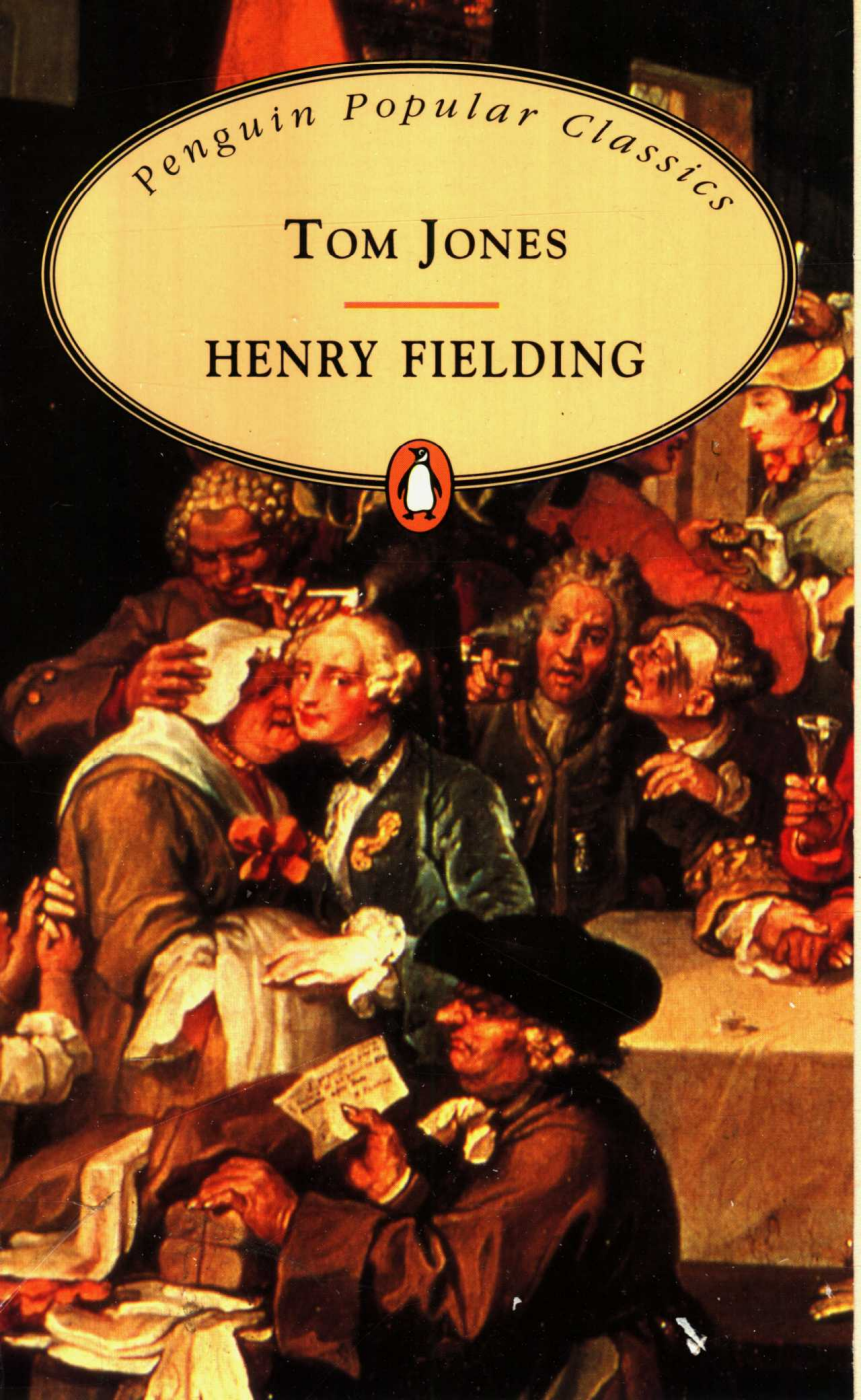
TOM JONES

HENRY FIELDING



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THE HISTORY OF TOM JONES

HENRY FIELDING

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published 1749
Published in Penguin Popular Classics 1994
7 9 10 8 6

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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TOM JONES

BY HENRY FIELDING

HENRY FIELDING (1707–54). A prolific dramatist and writer, he is now best known for his brilliant satire which, while attacking the hypocrisy of society, often jibes at the work of his contemporary, Samuel Richardson.

Born in April 1707 at Sharpham Park, near Glastonbury in Somerset, Henry Fielding was the son of General Edmund Fielding and Sarah Gould, a judge's daughter. The family soon moved to Dorset, where Fielding received his first lessons from private tutors. After his mother's death, when Fielding was eleven years old, and his father's subsequent remarriage he was sent to Eton. Enjoying his time here, he worked hard and made lifelong friends of his contemporaries Lyttleton, who later became a generous patron, and Pitt the Elder. In 1725 Fielding failed in his attempt to abduct a beautiful young heiress, which resulted in him being bound over to keep the peace. Settling in London, he was determined to earn his living as a dramtist. His first play, *Love in Several Masques*, was performed successfully in 1728. In the same year he attended the University of Leyden in order to study classical literature but he was forced to return eighteen months later when his allowance from his father dried up. Between the autumn of 1729 and 1737 Fielding lived in London, writing some twenty-five dramatic pieces, including a series of topical satires lampooning Sir Robert Walpole's government. They led, in part, to the introduction of the Stage Licensing Act in 1737, which effectively drew his career as a playwright and theatre manager to a close. Turning to the law as an alternative career, Fielding studied at the Middle Temple before being called to the bar in 1740. He soon returned to writing when, in an attempt to support his family – Fielding had met, wooed and eloped with the beautiful Charlotte Cradock in 1734 – he began editing a periodical called *The Champion*. After the publication of Richardson's *Pamela* in 1741 Fielding, angered by the moral hypocrisy of the novel, wrote *Shamela*, which ridiculed Richardson's work. He followed

it in 1742 with the successful *Joseph Andrews*. Although deeply affected by the death of his beloved wife in the winter of 1744, Fielding did go on to write his masterpiece, *Tom Jones*, which he finished in late 1748. It proved very successful and he received £700 for it from his publisher. His last novel, *Amelia*, was also a success. Defying convention and laying himself open to criticism from his enemies, Fielding married, in 1747, Mary Daniel, a former maid and close friend to his late wife. In their seven years together she gave birth to five children (of whom three died young). Serving as a Justice of the Peace, Fielding was also prominent in trying to suppress crime in London, developing, with his brother Sir John Fielding, plans for London's first police force. In 1754, suffering from severe gout, he was forced to resign to regain his health but died that October while in Lisbon.

Although *Tom Jones* is now considered one of the great comic novels in the English language, its publication in 1749 caused an outrage which reverberated throughout the eighteenth and ninteenth centuries, leading Dr Johnson to declare, 'I scarcely know a more corrupt work.'

Readers may also find the following books of interest: R. Alter, *Fielding and the Nature of the Novel* (1968); F. Homes Duddon, *Henry Fielding: His Life, Works and Times* (1952); B. Harrison, *Henry Fielding's* Tom Jones: *The Novelist as Moral Philosopher* (1975); L. J. Morrissey, *Henry Fielding: A Reference Guide* (1980); R. Paulson and T. Lockwood (eds.), *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage* (1969); C. J. Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress* (1972); C. J. Rawson, *Henry Fielding* (1968); Pat Rogers, *Henry Fielding* (1979).

To the Honourable

GEORGE LYTTLETON, ESQ.,

One of the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury

SIR,

NOTWITHSTANDING your constant refusal when I have asked leave to prefix your name to this dedication, I must still insist on my right to desire your protection of this work.

To you, sir, it is owing that this history was ever begun. It was by your desire that I first thought of such a composition. So many years have since passed that you may have, perhaps, forgotten this circumstance, but your desires are to me in the nature of commands, and the impression of them is never to be erased from my memory.

Again, sir, without your assistance this history had never been completed. Be not startled at the assertion. I do not intend to draw on you the suspicion of being a romance-writer. I mean no more than that I partly owe to you my existence during great part of the time which I have employed in composing it: another matter which it may be necessary to remind you of, since there are certain actions of which you are apt to be extremely forgetful; but of these I hope I shall always have a better memory than yourself.

Lastly, it is owing to you that the history appears what it now is. If there be in this work, as some have been pleased to say, a stronger picture of a truly benevolent mind than is to be found in any other, who that knows you and a particular acquaintance of yours will doubt whence that benevolence hath been copied? The world will not, I believe, make me the compliment of thinking I took it from myself. I care not. This they shall own: that the two persons from whom I have taken it, that is to say, two of the best and worthiest men in the world, are strongly and zealously my friends. I might be contented with this, and yet my vanity will add a third to the number, and him one of the greatest and noblest, not only in his rank but in every public and private virtue. But here, whilst my gratitude for the princely benefactions of the Duke of Bed-

ford bursts from my heart, you must forgive my reminding you that it was you who first recommended me to the notice of my benefactor.

And what are your objections to the allowance of the honour which I have solicited? Why, you have commended the book so warmly that you should be ashamed of reading your name before the dedication. Indeed, sir, if the book itself doth not make you ashamed of your commendations, nothing that I can here write will or ought. I am not to give up my right to your protection and patronage because you have commended my book, for though I acknowledge so many obligations to you, I do not add this to the number; in which friendship, I am convinced, hath so little share, since that can neither bias your judgement nor pervert your integrity. An enemy may at any time obtain your commendation by only deserving it, and the utmost which the faults of your friends can hope for is your silence or, perhaps, if too severely accused, your gentle palliation.

In short, sir, I suspect that your dislike of public praise is your true objection to granting my request. I have observed that you have in common with my two other friends an unwillingness to hear the least mention of your own virtues; that, as a great poet says of one of you (he might justly have said it of all three), you

Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.

If men of this disposition are as careful to shun applause as others are to escape censure, how just must be your apprehension of your character falling into my hands, since what would not a man have reason to dread if attacked by an author who had received from him injuries equal to my obligations to you!

And will not this dread of censure increase in proportion to the matter which a man is conscious of having afforded for it? If his whole life, for instance, should have been one continued subject of satire, he may well tremble when an incensed satirist takes him in hand. Now, sir, if we apply this to your modest aversion to panegyric, how reasonable will your fears of me appear!

Yet surely you might have gratified my ambition, from this single confidence: that I shall always prefer the indulgence of your inclinations to the satisfaction of my own. A very strong instance of which I shall give you in this address, in which I am determined to follow the example of all other dedicators,

and will consider not what my patron really deserves to have written but what he will be best pleased to read.

Without further preface, then, I here present you with the labours of some years of my life. What merit these labours have is already known to yourself. If from your favourable judgement I have conceived some esteem for them, it cannot be imputed to vanity, since I should have agreed as implicitly to your opinion had it been given in favour of any other man's production. Negatively, at least, I may be allowed to say that, had I been sensible of any great demerit in the work, you are the last person to whose protection I would have ventured to recommend it.

From the name of my patron, indeed, I hope my reader will be convinced at his very entrance on this work that he will find in the whole course of it nothing prejudicial to the cause of religion and virtue, nothing inconsistent with the strictest rules of decency, nor which can offend even the chastest eye in the perusal. On the contrary, I declare that to recommend goodness and innocence hath been my sincere endeavour in this history. This honest purpose you have been pleased to think I have attained; and to say the truth, it is likeliest to be attained in books of this kind, for an example is a kind of picture in which virtue becomes, as it were, an object of sight, and strikes us with an idea of that loveliness which Plato asserts there is in her naked charms.

Besides displaying that beauty of virtue which may attract the admiration of mankind, I have attempted to engage a stronger motive to human action in her favour by convincing men that their true interest directs them to a pursuit of her. For this purpose, I have shown that no acquisitions of guilt can compensate the loss of that solid inward comfort of mind which is the sure companion of innocence and virtue, nor can in the least balance the evil of that horror and anxiety which, in their room, guilt introduces into our bosoms. And again, that as these acquisitions are in themselves generally worthless, so are the means to attain them not only base and infamous but at best incertain, and always full of danger. Lastly, I have endeavoured strongly to inculcate that virtue and innocence can scarce ever be injured but by indiscretion, and that it is this alone which often betrays them into the snares that deceit and villainy spread for them. A moral which I have the more industriously laboured, as the teaching it is, of all others, the like-

liest to be attended with success, since I believe it is much easier to make good men wise than to make bad men good.

For these purposes I have employed all the wit and humour of which I am master in the following history, wherein I have endeavoured to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices. How far I have succeeded in this good attempt I shall submit to the candid reader, with only two requests: first, that he will not expect to find perfection in this work; and secondly, that he will excuse some parts of it if they fall short of that little merit which I hope may appear in others.

I will detain you, sir, no longer. Indeed I have run into a preface while I professed to write a dedication. But how can it be otherwise? I dare not praise you; and the only means I know of to avoid it, when you are in my thoughts, are either to be entirely silent or to turn my thoughts to some other subject.

Pardon, therefore, what I have said in this epistle, not only without your consent but absolutely against it; and give me at least leave, in this public manner, to declare that I am with the highest respect and gratitude,

SIR,

Your most obliged,

Obedient, humble servant,

HENRY FIELDING.

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