

THE WORLD'S CLASSIC

JOHN GALT  
THE PROVOST



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



JOHN GALT

*The Provost*



*Edited with an Introduction by*

IAN A. GORDON

Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1982

*Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP*

*London Glasgow New York Toronto*

*Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi*

*Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo*

*Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town*

*Melbourne Auckland*

*and associates in*

*Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia*

*Introduction, Notes, Bibliography, and Chronology*

© Oxford University Press 1973, 1982

*First published 1973 by Oxford University Press*

*First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1982*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

*Galt, John*

*The provost.—(The World's classics)*

*I. Title II. Gordon, Ian A.*

*823'.7 [F] PR4708.G2*

*ISBN 0-19-281629-2*

*Printed in Great Britain by  
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited  
Aylesbury, Bucks*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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THE Galt-Blackwood letters cited in this edition are excerpted from the Blackwood papers in the National Library of Scotland (cited by NLS MS. number) and the early Letter Books (cited as LB 1-4) of William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh, by courtesy of the National Library of Scotland and the present head of the firm, G. D. Blackwood, Esq. For permission to inspect and cite the early Minute Books of 'the Provost's' Town Council I am indebted to the Town Clerk of the Royal Burgh of Irvine. The University of Wellington and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland provided time and a grant-in-aid towards the travel involved in the research.

## INTRODUCTION

### I

THE PROVOST, first published in May 1822, was the fifth in the sequence of six Scottish regional stories that Galt wrote for William Blackwood between February 1820, when he submitted *The Ayrshire Legatees* to *Blackwood's Magazine*, and December 1822, when he published *The Entail*.<sup>1</sup> During these three years, Galt, hitherto known only as an industrious writer of travel-books, biographies, periodical articles, and numerous school text-books, emerged as a novelist of original powers. Full public recognition of his new status came with the appearance in May 1821 of *Annals of the Parish*, which aroused a chorus of praise from the critical periodicals and over night established his reputation.<sup>2</sup> Galt in later years was to claim that what he had created were not 'novels' but 'theoretical histories of society, limited, though they were required by the subject, necessarily to the events of a circumscribed locality'.<sup>3</sup> He had no need to be diffident. His achievement in the *Annals* and the sequence of studies of Scottish small-town life had been to expand the whole scope of the English novel.

By the time the *Annals* appeared in May 1821, Galt (who was living in London) had thrown himself into a group of new projects for Blackwood. *The Steamboat* was appearing monthly in the magazine; the composition of *Sir Andrew Wylie* advanced steadily; and, as if this were not enough, Galt proposed to Blackwood a plan for a 'citizen chronicle' parallel to the parish minister's 'Chronicle of Dalmailing' in the *Annals*. Blackwood replied on 20 May, 'I am quite delighted

<sup>1</sup> For fuller details of the planning and composition of the sequence, see my O.E.N. edition of *The Entail*, 1970, Introduction, pp. vii-xiii.

<sup>2</sup> In this series, ed. James Kinsley, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, 1833, ii, 220.

with the idea of Provost Hookie. It is a glorious subject',<sup>1</sup> and Galt was able to reassure him on 28 May that 'The provost is in a thriving way'.<sup>2</sup> During the summer of 1821 Galt worked steadily on all three projects. He moved to Edinburgh from September till January 1822 to complete *Sir Andrew Wyllie*, suspending *The Provost* temporarily; but he took the opportunity to have a contract drawn up on 29 December, accepting 'One hundred Guineas for the copyright of the Provost to make a similar volume to the Annals of the Parish'.<sup>3</sup>

On his return to London, he reported on 13 February 1822 that he was 'going on with the provost'<sup>4</sup> and on 19 February sent a 'portion' with a request for 'two copies of the proofs'.<sup>5</sup> Further 'portions' followed in rapid succession and Blackwood was able to announce in the March number of his magazine a publication date 'early in May' and to insert in the London weekly *John Bull* of 24 March an advertisement stating that *The Provost* was 'in the press'. Blackwood continued to be delighted with each portion as it arrived in Edinburgh and, for once, refrained from his customary temptation to edit and amend. He had earlier incurred Galt's mild displeasure by 'pruning' manuscripts submitted and was later to provoke an angry reaction against wholesale 'interference'. But *The Provost* he accepted without pressing for alterations—'I have read again what you sent me—it is excellent',<sup>6</sup> he wrote of one portion, and, of another, 'I like it very much'.<sup>7</sup>

The entire manuscript was in his hands by April and, deserting his usual Edinburgh printers, he had the work set up by A. and R. Spottiswoode in London. Galt was able to keep a careful eye on the proofs—'I am quite sensible of a

<sup>1</sup> Blackwood to Galt. LB 2, f. 32. Blackwood's clerk misread 'Pawkie' as 'Hookie'.

<sup>2</sup> Galt to Blackwood. NLS MS. 4006, f. 235.

<sup>3</sup> Galt to Blackwood. NLS MS. 4006, f. 246.

<sup>4</sup> Galt to Blackwood. NLS MS. 4008, f. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Galt to Blackwood. NLS MS. 4008, f. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Blackwood to Galt, 5 March 1822. LB 2, f. 296.

<sup>7</sup> Blackwood to Galt, 23 March 1822. LB 2, f. 304.

manifest advantage in having the sheets before me as I correct, chiefly with a view to verbal repetitions—The eye catches things of that sort so much quicker in print than in MS'.<sup>1</sup> Blackwood's lack of editorial interference and the decision to print in London had two consequences, important for later readers. *The Provost* is the only Galt novel published by Blackwood which appeared precisely in the form intended by the author; and Galt's close supervision of the proofs resulted in an accurate text with which he was completely satisfied. It is, in particular, the authority for Galt's manner of handling the printing of dialect, the spelling and accidentals of which he supervised with meticulous care. This book always remained the novel in which he took most pride—'I, very simply perhaps, acknowledge, that to myself it has always appeared superior to the *Annals of the Parish*, to which work it was written as a companion.'<sup>2</sup>

*The Provost* was published in an edition of 2,000 in May. It was an immediate success. The June number of *Blackwood's Magazine* was able to report that the 2,000 copies had sold in a fortnight and a second edition of the same size was melting away 'like snaw aff a dyke'. Though there were some grumbles about Galt's 'powers of fertility' (the *Monthly Review* in May) the general tone of contemporary reviews was enthusiastic. The London *Literary Gazette* of 22 June gave *The Provost* a six-column review, significantly headed 'Mr. Galt's Novels', and made it the opportunity for a full-scale appreciation of an author 'deservedly held in very high estimation' who was 'like one of the Flemish masters'. The reputation established by *Annals of the Parish* was firmly—and finally—consolidated by *The Provost*.

<sup>1</sup> Galt to Blackwood, 'April 1822'. NLS MS. 4008, f. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Literary Life*, 1834, i, 232.

*The Provost* is a brilliant fusion of two elements. The first is the small-town Scottish scene, which Galt had already exploited, most notably in the *Annals*. The second is the world of political action, which he had already handled with skill in the latter part of *Sir Andrew Wylie*. Galt, ever since as a young man he discovered Machiavelli, had been fascinated by the shrewd exercise of political power. As a political agent in London, lobbying in the House of Commons, he had seen it at work. His birthplace, the self-governing Royal Burgh of Irvine—the ‘Gudetown’ of *The Provost*—was large enough for political action, small enough to be displayed as a microcosm of the greater world beyond. Galt had left Irvine as a boy of ten; but he still retained a remarkably sharp memory of what he had heard discussed among his elders of the political manoeuvres on the Town Council, the local gossip—in a burgh of a few thousand inhabitants—of who had bribed whom with cash or office, who had used his position for personal gain, who had contrived to secure for a friend an advantageous lease (or ‘tack’) of a piece of town property. He remembered an impressive, middle-aged Bailie Fullerton, fifty years a Town Councillor, three times Provost. By 1821 he must be long dead. He would form a convenient starting-point for a self-revealing and ironical portrait of ‘Mr. Pawkie’, a small-town politician.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘period’ of *The Provost* is the ‘period’ of the *Annals*, from 1760 to the 1820s. The scene is Scotland before the Industrial Revolution, a country waking from a long rural

<sup>1</sup> But ‘Mr. Pawkie’, by a supreme ironical twist, contrived to have the last word. Bailie Fullerton was not dead. On 16 September 1825 the nonagenarian Bailie signed the Town Council minutes, confirming that he had conferred the freedom of the Royal Burgh of Irvine on ‘John Galt Esquire now of the City of London’. Galt recorded the incident in his *Literary Life*, 1834, i, 233–4, and said of his speech ‘Provost Pawkie himself could never have said anything half so good’.



to the promise of industry and commerce. The Reform had not been dreamt of. The Town Councils of the self-governing Scottish burghs were still, as they had been for centuries, self-perpetuating corporations. When a member died or retired, there was no election in the modern sense. The remaining members of a small Town Council picked a suitable successor. The town dignitaries were chosen in the same manner from within the limited group. The situation described in a report of 29 June 1710 by the Town Clerk of the Royal Burgh of Irvine was essentially unchanged during the sixty-year span of *The Provost*:

Their councill consists of fifteen merchants, including the provost, two baillies, dean of gild, and treasurer, and two trades, making in all seventeen. They elect their magistrats, viz., the provost and tuo baillies, yearly, the first Munday after Michal-mass; and the Friday proceeding they leit [i.e. list] the magistrats, and do put tuo on the leit to the old provost and four to the tuo old baillies, and the Friday preceeding that they elect their new councill, and on the Friday after the election of the magistrats they choose their dean of gild, treasurer, clerk, fiscall, officers, visitors of mercats, birlamen [petty officers] etc. and are yearly obliged to change tuo merchants and tuo trades. And the provost and tuo baillies are not to continue above tuo years.<sup>1</sup>

Even the provisions about compulsory changes could be easily circumvented and—as *The Provost* shows—a determined manipulator could make the system work very nicely to his advantage whether he was formally in office or not. He could work his way, in this closed circle, up the hierarchy from Councillor to Provost, step aside (sure of re-election), retreat (*pour mieux sauter*), and learn—as Mr. Pawkie did—to make the Council do his will.

*The Provost* is a remarkable piece of writing. It has the photographic sharpness of Defoe. Everything is seen in clear detail. The topography of Gudetown is even today the recog-

<sup>1</sup> *Muniments of the Royal Burgh of Irvine*, Edinburgh, 1890-1, ii, 131.

nizable topography of Irvine. The events described (and are in the Explanatory Notes to this edition) documented from the early Minute Books of the Town Council. The progress of Mr. Pawkie is organized on a rigid time-scale matches at every point the 'real' events of the time. In a sense, nothing is invented. Yet the whole novel is a considerable piece of imaginative creation, unified by Galt's ironical portrayal of the central figure.

James Pawkie recounts his career in town politics over the same years as Dr. Balwhidder's incumbency of the parish of Dalmailing. Galt chronicles the progress of a small Scottish town from 1760 to the early nineteenth century from the point of view of a sly ('pawkie') merchant who progresses from his apprenticeship, to his own shop, and then ownership of a considerable portion of the town (which he consumes like a 'caterpillar'), from a seat on the Town Council, where he soon learns 'to rule without being felt, which is the great mystery of policy', to the lucrative office of Dean of Guild, to Bailie, and finally to the supreme office of Provost, to which he contrives to be three times elected at strategic intervals, ensuring that both in office and in the intervening periods 'I was enabled to wind the council round my finger'.

Of all Galt's theoretical histories, *The Provost* is the most tightly constructed. There are no loose ends, no digressions, no alien interpolated passages. The self-told, self-revealing narrative moves steadily from young Pawkie's prudent choice of a profitable trade right to his masterly organizing as an old man of the vote of thanks and the 'very handsome silver cup, bearing an inscription in the Latin tongue', with which the council rewarded his service to Gudetown. He manipulates everybody and everything, the council, the corps of volunteers, the gentry, the local Member of Parliament, the newspaper, the traffic and the progress of the town. He can be kind; he is never ruthless. With grave decorum he feathers his own nest: public contracts contrive to effect improvements on or near his own properties; it is his shop that provides the uniforms

for the volunteers—‘I must confess’, he writes, ‘with a sort of sinister respect for my own interest’. But as he grows older (and wealthier) he ‘had less incitement to be so grippy’, and with a clear conscience he can become a reformer and can move (and insist on others moving) ‘to partake of the purer spirit which the great mutations of the age had conjured into public affairs’. Galt’s irony never falters.

## 3

The initial immediate success of *The Provost* was unquestionably due to its being accepted as a work of rich comedy. Its permanent value lies not so much in the succession of comic scenes as in Galt’s subtle and ironic study in self-revelation. It is comedy with serious overtones not recognized by many of his early readers, who mainly saw in it a further instalment of Scots dialect humour. But, though Galt was unaware of it, the best critic of his age had bought *The Provost* and immediately recognized it as a masterpiece. Coleridge’s copy came to light some years ago.<sup>1</sup> His annotation is—as usual—magistral and (with its side-glance at Wordsworth) can stand as the ultimate judgement on *The Provost*:

This work is not for the Many; but in the unconscious, perfectly natural, Irony of Self-delusion, in all parts intelligible to the intelligent Reader, without the slightest suspicion on the part of the Autobiographer, I know of no equal in our Literature. The governing Trait in the Provost’s character is no where caricatured. In the character of Betty, John’s wife, or the Beggar Girl intense Selfishness without malignity, as a *Nature*, and with all the innocence of a Nature, is admirably pourtrayed. In the Provost a similar *Selfness* is united with a *Slyness* and a plausibility eminently successful in cheating the man himself into a happy state of constant Self-applause. This and ‘The Entail’ would alone suffice to place Galt in the first rank of contemporary Novellists—and second only to Sir W. Scott in technique.

<sup>1</sup> See A. J. Ashley, ‘Coleridge on Galt’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Sept. 1930, p. 757.

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

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THE text is printed from the Bodleian copy of the first edition, published in May 1822. Another edition, with the words 'Second Edition' on the title-page, appeared in June 1822. Comparison of the two editions with a Hinman collator reveals that, apart from the insertion of the words 'Second Edition' on the June title-page, the two are identical and from the same setting of type. A. and R. Spottiswoode, the printers, either held the type standing; or (as is more probable) shrewdly estimating Galt's popularity ran off a reserve of extra copies, which they bound up with a revised title-page. This would explain the speed with which the second edition was available.

A few minor misprints (involving broken or missing letters, hyphen errors, and a duplicated word) have been silently corrected. Otherwise the text is an exact reprint of the first edition, since *The Provost* (see Introduction) was proofed by Galt with great care.

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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TWO editions (May and June, 1822) of *The Provost* appeared in Galt's lifetime. It was reprinted, with a modified text, with *The Steam Boat* and *The Omen* in Blackwood's Standard Novels, D. M. Moir being the editor (1841). This latter volume was re-issued in 1850 and 1869. An illustrated edition was issued in 1913 by T. N. Foulis, London and Edinburgh, and was reprinted (without the illustrations) in 1968 by C. Chivers, Ltd., Bath 'at the request of the Library Association'.

COLLECTED EDITIONS (MAIN NOVELS ONLY). *The Works of John Galt*, ed. D. S. Meldrum, introductions by S. R. Crockett, illustr., 8 vols. (Blackwood, 1895); *The Works of John Galt*, ed. D. S. Meldrum and W. Roughead, introductions by S. R. Crockett, illustr., 10 vols. (John Grant, 1936).

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BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM. The primary sources are Galt's *Autobiography*, 2 vols. (1833), and his *Literary Life, and Miscellanies*, 3 vols. (1834). The earliest memoir is by 'Δ' (D. M. Moir) in the 1841 edition of the *Annals*; modern biographies by J. W. Aberdein (1936), Ian A. Gordon (1972). For early criticism see *Blackwood's Magazine*, June 1822 (on his Scottish works prior to *The Entail*); *The Literary Gazette* (London), June 1822; *Edinburgh Review*, October 1923 ('Secondary Scottish Novels').

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# A CHRONOLOGY OF JOHN GALT

		Age
1779	(2 May) Born at Irvine, Ayrshire, eldest son of John Galt (1750-1817), shipmaster and merchant	
1787-8	Attends Grammar School, Irvine	8
1789	Family remove to Greenock, to new house on corner of Blackhall and West Burn Street. Galt attends classes in the Royal Close	10
1795	Galt a clerk in Greenock customs house, and then in mercantile office of James Miller	16
1797	Joint founder of literary and debating society	18
1803	Life of John Wilson, the Greenock poet, in John Leyden's <i>Scottish Descriptive Poems</i> . Extracts from Galt's <i>Battle of Largs, a Gothic Poem</i> publ. in <i>Scots Magazine</i> , April 1803, January 1804	24
1804	(May) Galt leaves Greenock for London. <i>The Battle of Largs</i> published and withdrawn. Galt in partnership with McLachlan, factor and broker	25
1808	Bankrupt. In business with brother Thomas, who leaves for Honduras	29
1809	(18 May) Galt enters Lincoln's Inn	30
1809-11	Mediterranean tour. Meetings with Byron	30-2
1811	Galt returns to London; abandons the law	32
1812	<i>Life of Cardinal Wolsey</i> ; five <i>Tragedies</i> ; <i>Voyages and Travels 1809-11</i> . Editor, <i>Political Review</i> . Brief commercial venture at Gibraltar	33
1813	Back in London. Marries Elizabeth Tilloch (20 April). <i>Letters from the Levant</i> . Manuscript of <i>Annals of the Parish</i> rejected by Constable. Last meeting with Byron	34
1814	Son John born. Galt edits, translates for, and contributes to <i>The New British Theatre</i> (4 vols.)	35
1815	Son Thomas born. Galt secretary of the Royal Caledonian Asylum for children of Scottish soldiers	36
1816	<i>The Majolo: a Tale</i> (2 vols.). <i>Life of Benjamin West</i> , vol. i (completed 1820)	37
1817	Father dies; son Alexander born	38