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XI

WILLIAM CONGREVE, THE MAN

WILLIAM CONGREVE
THE MAN

A Biography from New Sources

BY
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FOREWORD

I

WHEN Edmund Gosse, in 1888, wrote the first comprehensive biography of William Congreve, he was convinced that "unless fresh material should most unexpectedly turn up, the opportunity for preparing a full and picturesque life of this poet has wholly passed away." On revising the life in 1924, Gosse found that the intervening thirty-five years had added practically nothing to the known facts about Congreve, and regretted the continued lack of fresh sources out of which the author of *The Way of the World* might be interpreted as a human being. Other biographers have since appeared, but even the latest of them regrets that the individuality of Congreve is obscured by "an almost impenetrable veil."

It is not surprising, then, that the leading article of *The Times Literary Supplement* for September 25, 1937, speaks of William Congreve, the "man of superb genius," as also "the man of mystery." To his contemporaries, however, Congreve was no man of mystery. Dryden found him a personable young law student who could ably assist either in the translating of Juvenal or in the making of a contract with Tonson. Swift passed many a pleasant evening with this "very agreeable companion." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu declared Congreve the wittiest of all her acquaintances. Pope believed him "most honest hearted," and Steele praised his congeniality in no uncertain terms. "No one," he wrote, "after a joyfull Evening, can reflect upon an Expression of Mr. Congreve's that dwells upon him with Pain."

Few writers have had more generous and more discriminating critical appreciation. John Dryden, Dr. Johnson, William Hazlitt, George Meredith, and Bonamy Dobrée—these and many others have done justice to the creator of Millamant and Sailor Ben. But they have told us almost nothing of the boy whose inheritance, environment, and training fitted him as a very young man to delight London's popular audiences and to win over its most severe critic. Nor has anything substantial come to light concerning the personal circumstances of the older man who, after a few active years, tried in vain to slip away into a retirement secure from gossip and acclaim.

To the mass of critical appreciation already available this biography adds nothing directly. But it does attempt to make possible a more discerning and more sympathetic reading of Congreve by bringing from fresh sources new information about the boy and the man.

Congreve's background and early development help to explain the phenomenal success of his early work. Hardly less important is a just understanding of his later motives, for certain things he did—often reported but consistently misinterpreted during the last two hundred years—have left the impression that Congreve was affected, snobbish, and untrustworthy. Merely in justice to his work, it is high time to attempt a fuller view of the antecedents, characteristics, and motives of Congreve the man.

II

New material about Congreve has not been easy to find. There is no central storehouse of information, no large accumulation of letters, no helpful journal to which the biographer may turn. But tucked away here and there in the original manuscripts in England and Ireland—most of them never before examined by students of Congreve—there are many telling bits of information. Other documents by or about Congreve have been brought to America and are now in public libraries or in the hands of private collectors scattered from New England to California. No one of these fresh sources, by itself, goes far toward giving a full-length picture; but the new details, fitted together and interpreted, do much to fill out the portrait and to clarify features that have annoyed and puzzled students for two centuries.

Even the identity of Congreve's mother has been uncertain. None of the numerous biographical sketches of the dramatist appearing during the eighteenth century so much as mentions her. After 1800 she is variously referred to as Anne Fitzherbert, Mary Nicolls, Anne Browning, or Mary Browning. Gosse was never able to decide between Anne Fitzherbert and someone bearing "the maiden name of Browning." The most recent biographer, D. Crane Taylor, gives only passing mention to Congreve's mother as "Mary Browning whose family was somewhat obscure."

Congreve himself provided the key to the problem in the account of his life which he furnished to *The Poetical Register*. Giles Jacob, editor of the *Register*, applied to Congreve for assistance and received the following reply:

Sir,

Surrey-street, July 7, 1719

I much approve the Usefulness of your Work; any Morning, about Eleven, I shall be very ready to give you the Account of my own poor Trifles and Self, or any thing else that has fallen within the compass of my Knowledge, relating to any of my Poetical Friends.

I am, Sir,

Your Humble Servant,

William Congreve

In the resulting sketch of Congreve's life, apparently supplied by the dramatist himself, occurs this sentence: "He was born at a place call'd *Bardsa*, not far from *Leeds* in *Yorkshire*; being a part of the Estate of Sir *John Lewis*, his Great Uncle by his Mother's Side." A very little investigation at that time would have shown Congreve's connections, through his mother, with the prominent Lewis family of Yorkshire. But the eighteenth century, led by Dr. Johnson, discredited Congreve's claim to birth in Yorkshire and therefore paid little heed to what Congreve said about his family connections there. Fortunately it is still possible, by means of wills and other documents, to identify Congreve's mother, to trace her ancestry, and—more important—to show something of what the dramatist inherited from her.

Although more has been known of the family of Congreve's father, the Congreves of Staffordshire, the dramatist's relations to them have never been adequately traced through the family papers preserved in Stafford and through the detailed family genealogy kept in the handwriting of each generation since the sixteenth century. Without this genealogy it has hitherto proved difficult to distinguish between the dramatist and his four contemporary kinsmen also named William Congreve. The signed documents of one William Congreve have been widely collected and prized as those of the celebrated dramatist. Today at least six American libraries have among their manuscripts certain papers of this cousin erroneously ascribed to the dramatist.

From manuscripts still preserved at Kilkenny and Dublin it is possible to trace Congreve's boyhood in Ireland. The records of the Irish army show the wanderings of Congreve's father the lieutenant, and his little family, from the seaport of Youghal in the southeast to distant Carrickfergus, near Belfast; and then south again to the brilliant and cultivated life of Kilkenny, and finally back to Youghal. Municipal records of the Irish towns, and notes and pen sketches of contemporary travelers in Ireland, picture the environment in which young Congreve lived. New light on his school days at Kilkenny is shed by the manuscript notes of the school's patron and by the records of Congreve's schoolmaster.

More important still are the various manuscript records preserved at Trinity College, Dublin. Thanks to these, Congreve's college years are no longer a blank. The voluminous minutebook of Provost and Fellows—with its record of punishments, awards, and miscellaneous academic affairs—leaves no doubt as to the atmosphere in which Congreve spent his three years at college.

But the most significant document is the college *Buttery Book*,

Junior, Novr. 1685 to Octr. 1687. Here Congreve's name is set down forty-one times. Here, in a mass of information about purchases from cellar and kitchen, about fines for missing chapel, disputations, or the early morning lecture in science—here for the first time we have something really personal about the young man who was soon to win the plaudits of London with *The Old Bachelor*. As we see the contacts of the young college student with the flourishing theatre near-by in Smock Alley, we wonder a little less at the phenomenal success of his first comedy in Drury Lane.

A few years ago Joseph Wood Krutch rightly called attention to our inadequate knowledge of Congreve as a government official, noting that "it is not certain how abundantly he shared in the governmental favors then showered upon literary people." For this reason, I have searched the documents at the Public Record Office—the final authority in such matters—to determine the nature and extent of Congreve's public service.

It is impossible in a short preface to enumerate all the fresh materials drawn upon. Yet mention should be made of the ledgers of Messrs. Hoare & Company, who kept "running cashes" in Congreve's day, and of the Bank of England, and of Tom Twining's Coffee House (all doing business as usual today)—for all these have made their contributions. To these must be added miscellaneous documents of the South Sea Company, numerous wills, and other legal papers. Such documents help to give an intimate picture of Congreve at his simple lodgings in the Strand, or at the luxurious homes of his friends and fellows among the Kit-Cats.

Additional letters by Congreve have long been exceedingly difficult to find. Consequently, the eight new letters printed in this life, from widely scattered sources, will be welcome. Four new portraits of Congreve, reproduced from the original paintings, tell their own story. These show the dramatist at the age of twelve, twenty-three, thirty-four, and thirty-eight. The dates of these portraits make them more significant than the two well known paintings by Kneller, both of which are from a later period, long after Congreve had completed the work for which he is remembered. The portrait at the age of twelve, the original of which is now hanging at Chartley Hall, Staffordshire, furnishes in a note by the artist the exact date of Congreve's birth—a matter that has been in dispute for over two hundred years.

The new material here utilized has made possible the correction of many errors of long standing. For the most part, these corrections are made without comment, but the authority in each case is given in the notes.

III

Anyone who reads the many contemporary statements about Congreve's qualities as a man, and then, in chronological order, the scores of biographical sketches that appeared during the next two centuries, cannot help recognizing that, as time went on, Congreve the man—as distinguished from the dramatist—became progressively more distasteful to his biographers. By the end of the nineteenth century the Victorians had pictured him as so lacking in force and character that to Gosse he was "no very fascinating or absorbing human being." Dryden, Swift, and Pope would not have recognized in this new Congreve the man they had known so well.

The phenomenal decline of Congreve's reputation as a man began in the eighteenth century. Throughout that century he was censured as an inglorious example of an eminent man whose pride had led him meanly to deny the country of his birth. Dr. Johnson avoided the specific accusation that Congreve had falsified the place of his birth but damned him effectively with the remark that "it was said by himself that he owed his nativity to England, and by everybody else that he was born in Ireland." Then, to drive his point home, Johnson took a whole paragraph to lament the fact that men of eminence are often "very deficient in candour," and lightly tell "falsehoods of convenience from which no evil immediately ensues except the general degradation of human testimony."

Finally, at the end of the century, the record of baptism proved that Congreve was born in Yorkshire, as he had said, and that "everybody else" was wrong. But a century of repeated accusation had made its impression. Posterity had come to think of Congreve as proud and insincere. The very registry that proved him honest as regards the place of his birth was now hailed as positive proof that he had lied about the time. For the record showed baptism in February, 1670, whereas 1672 had long been the accepted year. Nobody took the trouble to discover that the year 1672 as that of Congreve's birth was first specifically mentioned in print the year after his death, and that, on the one and only occasion when he is on record as mentioning it, Congreve gave his correct age.

Another strong factor against Congreve's reputation has been the ill-considered but influential snap-judgment of Voltaire, who once visited Congreve and thought him exceedingly vain because he spoke of his works as "trifles" and wished to be visited "upon no other Foot than that of a Gentleman, who led a Life of Plainness and Simplicity." This story has seldom been overlooked in even the shortest sketches of Congreve's life, while few indeed have remembered the calm esti-

mate of Swift, who knew Congreve intimately from his school days. Vanity was never charged against Congreve by Dryden, Pope, or by anyone else intimately acquainted with him. Except for the fact that posterity had already come to think of Congreve as vain and insincere, it would have seen the injustice of accepting the estimate of a passing foreigner so utterly inconsistent with the expressed opinions of those who knew Congreve best.

IV

Probably the chief cause of the decline and fall of Congreve's personal reputation has been his hitherto unexplained, and apparently strangely capricious, conduct toward the two women with whom he was most intimately associated—Anne Bracegirdle and Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough.

All London had heard of Congreve's infatuation with charming Anne Bracegirdle, the darling and the reputed Diana of the Restoration stage. And London also knew that afterwards, for some obscure reason, Congreve transferred his attentions to the young Duchess of Marlborough—was with her at the watering places, at her Lodge in Windsor Park, and at her city home in St. James's Square. Immediately after his death the town gossiped about how "very particular" the Duchess had been on Mr. Congreve's account, and how she had shown "so great an affection for his dead body that she quitted her house and sat by his corpse till he was interred."

These were choice bits for the gossips. Soon the unprincipled Curll had in his press a book with a scandalously alluring title—*Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Amours of William Congreve, Esq.* Mrs. Bracegirdle was concerned enough to demand a sight of the manuscript. Her request was refused and, according to the writer of the Preface, "she then wanted to know by what Authority Mr. Congreve's Life was written, and what Pieces were contain'd in it that were genuine? Upon being civilly told, there would be found several Essays, Letters and Characters of that Gentleman's writing, she with a most affected, contradictory, Dramatick-drawl, cry'd out, *Not one single Sheet of Paper I dare to swear.*"

The Duchess was equally concerned and wished, in addition, to stop the printing of Congreve's will, in which she was the chief beneficiary. But Curll declared that he valued "neither the Messages nor Threats, either of Peer or Peasant," and pretended to dismiss them as mere "*Drawcansir-Bullyings.*" Notwithstanding this assumed boldness, Curll did not dare carry to the extreme his affront of the great lady. He did not print the gossip about her. Indeed, he

did not justify the alluring title of his book. If he knew the true circumstances—and he probably did not—he failed to show how Anne Bracegirdle and the Duchess had fitted into Congreve's life, why Congreve had made a will in which he left so little to the one and so much to the other, who could not possibly have needed it.

And so, for two centuries, this will involving Congreve's relations with the two women who meant most to him has been thought strange and inexplicable, or else a "ridiculous" instance of extreme pride and worldliness. If not a part of the Congreve "mystery," it may be said to be the one more or less substantial skeleton which has remained hidden in his closet.

Fortunately documents are still preserved which permit us to bring the skeleton into the open, to explain the actions that have been hitherto so puzzling. Oddly enough, the very will which has helped to shroud Congreve in ungrateful mystery through the years, now studied for the first time in the light of such documents as Duchess Henrietta's will, becomes the medium from which Congreve emerges, an understandable man acting from very human motives.

To most of those who have made available to me manuscript collections in England, Ireland, and America, or who have liberally assisted in other ways, I must remain silently grateful except as I can remember them in the notes. Some more fundamental obligations are recorded here. I must express thanks to Miss Annabel Hodges for the map of Congreve's London; to Professor John Robert Moore for assistance in the placing of landmarks; to Mr. Stewart Robertson for helpful advice; to Malcolm Elwin, Esquire, for kindly allowing me to examine his important manuscript work on Congreve; and to Mr. Carl Sandburg, who has read some chapters of this biography while it was in preparation and has given helpful suggestions. More particularly I am indebted to the untiring assistance, the wide scholarship, and the discriminating taste of my friend Professor Alwin Thaler.

Sir Geoffrey Congreve, Bart., has generously placed at my disposal the Congreve family genealogy in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century manuscripts, has given permission for the reproduction of Congreve portraits in his collection, and has granted free use of the materials he has gathered for a history of his family. To the American Council of Learned Societies I express deep appreciation for assistance which has made possible the publication of this biography. Finally I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my son Nelson, who has been my companion in tracing Congreve through Ireland and England and has touched vitally many parts of the work.

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE IN YORKSHIRE

I

THREE quarters of a century before William Congreve was born at Bardsey in Yorkshire, his great-great-grandfather Timothy Bright was rector at the neighboring village of Barwick-in-Elmet. Queen Elizabeth was just completing her long reign, and it was she who had preferred him to this Yorkshire post. Dr. Bright was already past middle age. As a lad of eleven, in 1561, he had entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and seven years later had taken the degree of bachelor of arts. Thereafter he earned two medical degrees and a license to practice his profession. In the midst of his duties at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, he found time to write medical treatises, one of which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney.

Dr. Timothy Bright was a philosopher as well as a physician. His true bent appeared in his *Treatise of Melancholie, Containing the causes therof, & reasons of the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies: with the physicke cure, and spirituall consolation for such as haue thereto adioyned an afflicted conscience* (London, 1568). Whether or not this was, as it has been supposed, the inspiration for Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, at least it revealed the author's interest in philosophical reflection. Timothy Bright was a man to welcome the privacy of a village rectory. He abandoned medicine, took holy orders, and was granted a living in Yorkshire. This appointment came after he had won the favor of his practical queen by dedicating to her his *Characterie. An Arte of shorte, swifte, and secrete writing by character*—in other words, the invention of modern shorthand.

At Barwick-in-Elmet, just east of the city of Leeds, Timothy Bright spent the last twenty years of his life. He turned from Plato, in Greek and Latin versions, to books in Hebrew and Syriac, and studied Italian music. He had an Irish harp which he "most usuallye played upon."¹ Sometimes he piped on his theorbo, a flute-like instrument that is mentioned in his great-great-grandson's novel *Incognita*. It was an old instrument which seems to have died out

¹ From the will of Timothy Bright, dated 9 August 1615, as published in *Yorkshire Arch. Jour.*, XVII (1902-03), 52-54. For the facts of Bright's life, and for his significance as inventor of modern shorthand, see *DNB*.

along with this antique breed of gentlemen who could assimilate all the branches of science in one mind. Dr. Bright's fame as a splendid, if incalculable, asset to the district survived him down the years. As late as the eighteenth century it was told how at one time, in a pleasant intellectual haze, he had turned and asked his steward to buy some oxen grazing in the open field, forgetting that these same oxen already belonged to him.²

When Timothy Bright, B.A., M.B., Lic. Med., M.D., rector of Methley and Barwick-in-Elmet, died in 1615, he left to future generations of his family his best though least tangible asset, the fine tradition of a useful and richly cultivated life. His worldly possessions he had neatly disposed of in his will. To his brother, a clergyman, he gave his Irish harp, one of his two theorbos, some books on music, a Hebrew Bible, a Syriac Testament, and the works of Plato. To his younger son Titus, a physician, he left all of his "books of Physick and Philosophie." He had previously given his estate, so his will indicated, to his oldest son Timothy, a barrister living twenty miles farther south in Yorkshire near Doncaster.

This older son had studied law at Gray's Inn and had been admitted to the bar in 1608. In the same year he married Edith Lewis, of the old and prominent county families of Lewis and Reresby. Nine years later the barrister and his wife died within a few weeks of each other, leaving four young children in the care of their uncle Thomas Lewis at the family manor at Marr near Doncaster.³

One of these four orphans was Mary Bright. By 1635 she was the wife of Walter Browning, a young clergyman in residence at Donnington Chapel, Yorkshire, a few miles south of Doncaster. Walter had been a poor boy, studying at King's College, Cambridge; and he had not grown wealthy during the five years after he received his master's degree. Before he died in 1636 he made a will in which he urgently tried to make his little estate provide for the needs of his young daughter Mary. It was then nearly a century before Defoe was to startle his own generation by proposing seriously to educate women; and yet this Yorkshire clergyman left the whole of his meagre fortune for the "education" and care of "Marie my daughter."⁴ Just

² *Publications of the Thoresby Soc.*, XXI (1912), 185.

³ For the lawyer Timothy Bright see the "Register of Admissions to Gray's Inn," *Collectanea Genealogica*, ed. Joseph Foster (London, 1881), p. 101; *Yorks. Arch. Soc., Record Series*, XXXIV (1904), 118. For the pedigree of the Bright family and the will of Edith Lewis Bright, see Joseph Hunter, *South Yorkshire, the History and Topography of the Deanery of Doncaster, in the Diocese and County of York* (London, 1828), I, 365.

⁴ See the will, dated 7 June 1636 and probated by Mary Browning, widow, on 18

how adequately the will of the earnest young clergyman was executed we do not know. If his wishes were carried out, and if his daughter Mary Browning, who was to be the mother of William Congreve, did receive an education better than average, it was only fitting for one whose father, whose grandfather, and whose great-grandfather had devoted themselves to the learned professions.

A few years after Walter Browning died, his widow married Dr. George Roe of Doncaster.⁵ And so it was that Mary Browning grew to womanhood in the peaceful home of a physician in South Yorkshire. It was the period of the Civil War, but it is not likely that the stress and turmoil of those years invaded the quiet home of the physician in Doncaster.

II

Far different was it just sixty miles south at the home of the Congreves in Staffordshire. William Congreve, the lad who was to be the father of the dramatist, was only five years old when the Civil War opened in 1642.⁶ His father, Richard Congreve, was the prosperous squire of Stretton Hall and a staunch Royalist—fair game for the Roundheads of Oliver Cromwell. In 1643 they raided the Stretton estate. They drove off Richard's horses and his cattle; they robbed him of his money, and even of clothing. Again the following year they returned to rob and pilfer, and yet again and again during the period of civil strife. Indeed, the losses which Richard Congreve sustained at this time because of his "steady attachment to the Royal cause in the great rebellion" were to be keenly felt in the years to come.⁷

One of Richard's younger brothers was slain in battle, and two others fought valiantly for King Charles throughout the war. The

December 1638, Somerset House, P. C. C., Lee 181. See also the entries for Walter Browning in *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, compiled by John Venn and J. A. Venn (Cambridge, 1922 ff.); and Hunter, *South Yorkshire*, I, 138.

⁵ Mary Bright Browning was still a "widow" when she probated her first husband's will at the end of 1638. Her first child by her second husband, Dr. Roe, was baptized on 3 April 1640. See Hunter, *South Yorkshire*, I, 365.

⁶ Information about the Congreves of Staffordshire is derived chiefly from the manuscript record of the family now in possession of Sir Geoffrey Congreve, Bart., of Chartley Hall, Stafford, through whose kindness I have been permitted to examine the document. The manuscript is called the *Erdswick Book* because it was begun by Sampson Erdswick, the historian, about 1593. It gives a mass of information about the Congreve family not available elsewhere and is, of course, the chief authority for the family genealogy. It is difficult to understand why this important manuscript has been hitherto overlooked by the biographers of Congreve the poet.

⁷ See the *Congreve Family Papers*, William Salt Library, Stafford, and Br Mus. Add. MS. 16,569, ff. 66, 67. The first raid was made in 1643 and others followed in 1644, 1645, 1646, and 1647.

Congreves never wavered in their loyalty, even when all seemed lost with the establishment of the Commonwealth. After the disastrous battle of Worcester, in 1651, Richard Congreve aided the twenty-one-year-old Charles II to escape from Cromwell's men. The young King would almost certainly have fallen into Cromwell's hands but for the loyalty of thirteen Staffordshire squires who hid him well near Stretton Hall.⁸

From a very early period the paternal ancestors of the dramatist had resided at the hamlet of Congreve in Staffordshire. Early in the fourteenth century Simon de Congreve married his son to Catherine Schampion and through her acquired the more important estate of Stretton. Nine generations later, in 1633, Richard Congreve married Anne Fitzherbert of Norbury in Derbyshire. In the old *Erdswick Book*, the manuscript in which the Congreve family has kept its history generation by generation, Richard wrote down the record of his twelve children. Elizabeth and Martha were born at Norbury in 1634 and 1635; John at Stretton in 1636. Then follows the entry for William, who according to a note in a later hand, "married Mary, dau. of Walter Browning of the County of Norfolk," and became the father of the dramatist. The original entry in Richard's handwriting is as follows:

William
h. 3.20 P.M. was born at Stretton 17 september 1637.
William, Earle of Newcastle
William Perpoint of Tonge Castle Esq
The Lady Dorothy Fitzherbert of Norbury were Gossipps.

This Earl of Newcastle who assisted at the christening was William Cavendish (1592–1676), the patron of Ben Jonson, and later of Dryden. After the Restoration he was created the first Duke of Newcastle. William Perpoint, or Pierrepont (1607?–1678), was the grandfather of the first Duke of Kingston, whose daughter was the famous Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

Born a year after his brother John, William Congreve the elder was thus narrowly shut out of the Stretton estate of six hundred pounds a year. He could not be lord of the manor; and he did not choose, like his younger brother Thomas, to matriculate at Cam-

⁸ King Charles II never consummated his first generous intention of establishing a new order of Knights of the Royal Oak to honor the thirteen loyal squires who made possible his escape. He did, however, present Richard Congreve with a painting of a court beauty by Lely, which is still preserved at Chartley Hall. For a list of the thirteen persons intended for the knighthood see *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, William Salt Arch. Soc. (1920–22), p. 129.