

David Oakleaf. *A Political Biography of Jonathan Swift*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008. pp. ix + 266.

Jonathan Swift has been well served by his biographers. Irvin Ehrenpreis's three substantial volumes, published between 1962 and 1983, remain the first resource for any serious student.¹ James Downie, in 1984, carefully placed Swift's ideas in the context of the new understanding of Britain's first age of party politics that had been developed over the preceding twenty years by J.H. Plumb, Geoffrey Holmes and others.² A year later, David Nokes offered a new biographical study, built around the intriguing idea that the key to Swift's life, and a fertile source for subsequent misreadings of his character, was a hatred of hypocrisy so strong that it led him consistently to represent his own thoughts and actions as more selfish and misanthropic than in fact they were.³ In 1998, Victoria Glendinning produced a lively narrative biography for the general reader.⁴

The latest addition to this already substantial body of work, by David Oakleaf, takes a different approach again. Commissioned as part of a new series of eighteenth-century political biographies of authors, its aim is to relate Swift's most important writings to the political and cultural background against which they were produced, as a means of making them comprehensible to the modern reader. Successive chapters discuss Swift's early political and satirical works, his heyday as a polemicist for the Harley ministry, and his dramatic re-emergence in the 1720s as a spokesman for the grievances of Protestant Ireland. The book ends, for all practical purposes, with a sur-

¹ Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works and the Age*. 3 vols. (London: Methuen, 1962-83).

² J.A. Downie, *Jonathan Swift: Political Writer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725* (London: Macmillan, 1967); Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

³ David Nokes, *Jonathan Swift; A Hypocrite Reversed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴ Victoria Glendinning, *Jonathan Swift* (London: Hutchinson, 1998).

prisingly brief discussion of the notorious pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* published in 1729, sixteen years before the author's death.

The potential weakness of literary biography is circularity: the writings of Charles Dickens are interpreted against the background of a supposed reconstruction of mid-nineteenth-century English society that on inspection turns out to be itself derived primarily from a reading of *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*. This is not a trap Dr. Oakleaf is in any danger of falling into. Far from taking Swift's own presentation of events at face value, he draws on the results of modern research to emphasise his subject's curious mixture of political insight and practical naivety. Swift's polemics against the growth of credit, for example, ignored the extent to which the landed classes he idealised as the core of the political nation were themselves deeply implicated in the commercial and financial revolution against which he protested. He ludicrously overestimated his own importance to the leaders of the Tory ministry of 1710-14, mistaking their flattery of a useful writer of propaganda for admission to their secret councils. Meanwhile he remained blissfully unaware both of the full destructive extent of the rivalry between Robert Harley and Henry St. John, the two leading ministers, and of the clandestine manoeuvres by which both men sought to end the war with France and to explore their options in relation to the exiled Stuart court. At times, indeed, Oakleaf's careful recounting of the highly specialised debates that have arisen as historians have tried to make sense of this complex period is probably more detailed than most readers of the literary texts are likely to welcome. But any serious student will be able to turn to him for a full and up-to-date introduction to the successive episodes in high politics that provided Swift with some of his most fertile subject matter.

The starting point for Oakleaf's discussion of Swift's politics is his subject's firm support for the Revolution of 1688. Such an analysis arguably glosses over the scattered evidence of private reservation emphasised by F.P. Lock and Ian Higgins—for example, Swift's comment that a regency under Mary would have been a better

solution than the straightforward deposition of James II.⁵ Indeed it could be argued that the very bluntness of Swift's declarations of support for the Revolution, presented as the only possible solution to a desperate situation, should be seen as masking a reluctance to disturb his own equilibrium by probing the underlying issues of legitimacy in any depth. But the main thrust of Oakleaf's argument is surely correct. Swift, it is true, exhibited an almost morbidly lively sense of the evils likely to arise from any weakening of established authority, whether in the church, the state, or the world of learning. Yet he was also, as Oakleaf points out, willing to state explicitly that absolutism was "a greater evil than anarchy itself." (81) In the face of such a clear statement, attempts to demonstrate that he was "really" a Jacobite, or even a Tory, are impossible to sustain.

Swift's own preferred definition of his political allegiance was that he was an Old Whig. In other words, he claimed to remain true to the principles of the party that had emerged to resist popery and an apparent drift towards absolutism in the reign of Charles II, principles that the Whigs of his own day had allegedly abandoned in their quest for power. This convenient formula became the central theme of Downie's influential analysis of Swift's politics. Oakleaf, however, is more sceptical. The claim to be an Old Whig, he suggests, was less a statement of genuine conviction than a rhetorical device by which Swift could present himself as a man of principle, standing above mere factional politics. Instead, Oakleaf emphasises the untidy reality that lay behind the apparently clear cut labels of Whig and Tory, and the deep ideological divisions on religion and on the legitimacy of the Revolution that existed within both parties. Swift, a High Churchman who argued for a pragmatic acceptance of the removal of James II, would in Oakleaf's view have found himself within a minority in either of the two parties. And he was by no means the only one to have crossed party lines in mid-career, as both

⁵ F.P. Lock, *Swift's Tory Politics* (London: Duckworth, 1983); Ian Higgins, *Swift's Politics: A Study in Disaffection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Whigs and Tories sought to adapt traditional political principles to meet radically new circumstances.

As a guide to Swift's political writings, set against their contemporary background, Oakleaf's study is a valuable contribution: detailed yet lucid, compact yet thorough and well informed. The price to be paid for this clarity of focus, however, is that Swift's personal life is passed over largely in silence. For example, of the political contradictions arising from his family background—on the one hand, a staunchly royalist English grandfather who became an important part of Swift's personal mythology, and on the other, less readily acknowledged, a father who came to Ireland as one of the many profiteers arriving in the wake of the victorious Oliver Cromwell—there is no discussion. There is likewise no analysis of Swift's long career as a pastor and ecclesiastical administrator. More striking still, the much-debated issue of his private life, centred on his difficult relationship to two women, "Stella" and "Vanessa," is mentioned only briefly in the context of a wider discussion of the air of mystery that clung to his affairs in general.

With many biographical subjects, this last omission might amount to no more than the screening out of gossip and trivia so as to concentrate instead on the essentials. With Swift, it is more difficult to be sure. The uncertainty arises because Oakleaf's bypassing of his subject's tortured personal life goes along with a certain neglect of the darker side of his literary output. That a monograph focussed on Swift's political writing should have little to say about such purely satirical works as his account of the bedtime of "Corinna, pride of Drury Lane," with its grotesque physical imagery, is understandable enough. But even in relation to the key political texts, Oakleaf's analysis seems at times peculiarly sanitised. In *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, he discovers in the juxtaposition of Houyhnhnm and Yahoo, not the ultimate literary expression of Swift's misanthropy, but instead "a remarkably expansive vision of humanity." (192) In the same way, the short account of *A Modest Proposal*, with its vision of the children of the poor farmed as a source of choice meat for elite consumers, becomes primarily an expression of "his horror at human

oppression.”(201) Both interpretations are correct as far as they go. Both, however, omit the element of nightmare, born of a realisation of what human beings are capable of doing and of being reduced to, that forms another, equally significant, component of Swift’s vision.

These consequences of the exclusion of the personal and psychological dimension from Oakleaf’s study have to be emphasised, because they have a potential relevance to the central question that he poses to his readers and himself. Swift, he insists, was above all an opponent of modernity. The decline of political liberty, the rise of the moneyed interest, the hack journalism parodied in *A Tale of the Tub*, deism and irreligion: all of these were, in his view, part of the same process of decline, as society abandoned the true values embodied in classical learning, the balanced constitution, and the authoritative rule of an established church. But this raises the question of the continuing appeal of Swift’s work to a modern audience. More particularly, it invites speculation as to why it retains relevance to such politically engaged readers as George Orwell and, more recently, Edward Said. How was it that “an authoritarian Dean devoted to an ideal past ... found a voice in which future colonial and postcolonial readers would also hear themselves?”(10)

In reply to his own question, Oakleaf suggests two answers. In part, he implies, what changed was the political circumstances. By the 1720s, festering in what he considered exile in Dublin, Swift could no longer aspire, as he had done earlier in his career, to write for an intellectual and political elite. Instead, his return to political pamphleteering required him to adopt the voice of everyman. In the *Draper’s Letters*, a self-deprecating shopkeeper articulated the sentiments of ordinary citizens threatened by the machinations of the great. *Gulliver’s Travels*, in this interpretation, becomes the logical conclusion of that retreat from exclusivity and partisanship: a narrative that exposes the relativity of all cultural values, and ends by calling into question the notion of identity itself. Secondly, Oakleaf suggests that it is in fact Swift’s very rejection of modernity that gives his work a continuing relevance for those who live with its outcome. He is at once “retrograde and progressive,” (177) drawing on a com-

mitment to an idealised agrarian past to offer a critique of the capitalist economy, and the over-mighty state, that continues to speak to the unhappy long-term heirs of the social and political changes that so disturbed him.

Both of these answers, however, have a slightly tentative feel. The first depends on setting the Irish writings of the 1720s apart as qualitatively different from the rest of the Swift canon. The second focuses on one strand in a complex skein of ideas and preconceptions. Moreover, Oakleaf himself shows signs of unease at the implications of what he suggests. His starting point is the continued relevance of Swift to an Orwell, a Gandhi, or a Said. But he nevertheless warns that, in their reading of his works, “they are looking for a mirror that will reflect their own commitments, and commonly find instead a distorting glass.”(8) Swift’s capacity to excite their enthusiasm, in fact, is “an important but secondary fact about his writing.”(11) In part, these hesitations reflect the dilemma of the literary biographer: the inescapable tension between an impulse to bring out the continuing relevance of the work in question, and a recognition of its roots in the time and place in which it was written. In part, however, what is also at issue is perhaps the limitations of literary biography itself. There is a political narrative to explain how the narrow partisan of the 1690s became the universal spokesman of the 1720s. But there is also a personal narrative, of stifled emotions, unfulfilled attachments, and humanitarian impulses cramped by a deep-rooted fear and distrust. And that narrative too surely forms part of the background to texts that continue to fascinate and disturb readers in a world so different from the one in which they were created.

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