Sandwiched between the bi-centennial of the birth of Walter Scott in 1971 and the centennial of the death of Thomas Carlyle in 1981, bi-centenary notice of John Galt has of course been thin. The eight essayists in John Galt 1779-1979 expose some of the reasons for this restraint: Galt's narrow focus on the western region of Scotland; the consequent difficulty posed by dialect; the greater difficulty posed by his assumptions of value--his Whiggish populism, his ironic post-Calvinism. But the contributors to the volume nevertheless avow their own continued interest in Galt, for reasons, and with a conviction, that may well add some converts.

The volume opens with a graceful resume of Galt's biography, by Ian Gordon, dean of modern Galt scholars. Professor Gordon here adds little to his own definitive biography. Canadian readers may well feel that new details from Timothy's The Galt's, A Canadian Odyssey might well have been incorporated, but Professor Gordon remains convinced that "the Canadian years...were of slight significance to him as a writer." The Autobiography, and Literary Life and Miscellanies offer contrary evidence: these two hectic works, which rival even the best of the novels in interest, were the spin-off--or blow-out--of the Canadian frustrations and achievements. (Let us hope that Professor Gordon will add the two autobiographic works to the list of Galt re-issues which he has been editing.)

John Galt 1779-1979 unfortunately contains no analyses of the two most recently re-issued volumes, The Last of the Lairds (1976) and Selected Short Stories (1978), but there is a fine commentary on the third-to-last reprint, The Member (1975). Political historian John Ward picks up a single specific allusion (to anti-Reformer William Holmes) and then fans out into detailed comment on the "jobbery" of the Reform Bill years. Ward also confronts the general question--the genre question--of the value of a political novel as historical "evidence". It's an interesting question to raise regarding a novel written in the period of Disraeli's Coningsby, the period reflected in Trollope's later novels, and exploited in George Eliot's Middlemarch.

Two other essays in the collection also take a run at this question. Dr. Anand Chitnis shows how Galt as historian derived from David Hume's concern with history as something other than a record of wars and treaties. The Annals shows the shift from agrarian to town life, when the Enlightenment spread, late in its development, to the West of Scotland, and Glasgow emerged toward its "Victoria might". For Dr. Chitnis, Galt both represents and deals with the running-out of Enlightenment. Micah Balwhidder is appropriately placed within a process of development, both of Presbyterian theology and of philosophical speculation, and this characterization is carefully related to the practical accomplishments of the enlightenment--developments in medicine, agricultural inventions, and the growth of shipping and other transportation which came to centre in Glasgow.

In a similar vein, Christopher Whatley urges a qualified acceptance of the "realism" of Galt's work. Galt ignored many aspects of Ayrshire industrialization; he "ignored the massive contributions which the landowners made"; but he was good on the specifics of agricultural change, on road improvement, smuggling, coal, the rise of Glasgow markets. Both Whatley and Chitnis, as historians developing earlier explorations by Professors MacQueen and Brownlie, add to our sense of Galt's strengths and weaknesses as a realistic reporter, while enriching the non-historian's understanding of an age of change.

Change is the central theme in Ian Campbell's study of The Ayrshire Legatees. In this novel, Campbell contends, the plot is given an atypical twist by its drama of sudden wealth. But Galt subtly studies the resultant changes: the cross-currents in the Pringle family, the splits in the parish from which they absent themselves, and the upheavals in the "wider world [that] seethes outside". Dr. Campbell draws a parallel between the Legatees and the Canadian novels of Robert Knowles, and uses the comparison to emphasize Galt's ironic interest in the subtle processes of adjustment.

The word "irony" recurs throughout this bi-centenary volume, but instead of monotony, the result is subtle clarification, for each of the critics points out different
aspects, objects, and tones in the ironies. In the central group of essays on Annals of the Parish for instance, Kenneth Simpson writes deftly on "Ironic Self-Revelation in Annals", illuminating Mr. Balwhidder's complex function in the novel, and Galt's "theological irony": the discrepancy between Balwhidder's narrow and egocentric view of an intervening Providence and his "practical materialism" and desire for comfort and peace; between the humility proper to a minister, and the self-importance of a garrulous narrator; and between the conservative aging narrator and the dynamic times he lives through. All of Galt's irony, says Simpson, however, is "reductive, not destructive", amusing and compassionate.

In an essay on Ringan Gilhaize, Patricia Wilson turns to a darker irony. Galt, she says, used this study of four generations to suggest crucial changes in theology, from Calvinist, to Covenanter, to Cameronian. John MacQueen also focuses on the changes from a Catholic hierarchic society to an egalitarian Calvinist one in his analysis of Ringan Gilhaize. He connects "covenanting stubbornness" with the growth of individualism and capitalism though the actors in this historical drama are of course unaware of such connections. MacQueen claims that Galt used the device of an autobiographical narrator here "in its most symphonic development", to prod us into recognition of the ironies of perspective. Professor MacQueen's article is brief (in comparison to Patricia Wilson's rather over-long essay on the same novel), but it contributes succinctly to a clarification of Galt's theological position. Galt was, says MacQueen, a predestinationist but not a believer in particular Providence. These two essays together clarify the subtleties of religious conviction and obsession in a past difficult to "repossess". They should help break one of the barriers that have prevented Galt's work from reaching a wide audience outside of Scotland.

The other great barrier to general readership is of course dialect. On this topic, Derek McClure suggests how subtle Galt's use is--how appropriate for different speakers, how revealing of the real bilingualism of his time, how artistic, even in its inconsistencies. In a clever comparison of dialects of Micah Balwhidder and Provost Pawkie, McClure shows how the use of Scots or English--"a matter of choice, though not necessarily of conscious choice"--results in subtleties of self-revelation. To his careful analysis of the way certain scenes are ironically reinforced by the fluctuation from pungent, personal Scots or official, meditative English, McClure appends a list of particular Scotticisms "which have by no means disappeared from Scottish speech" (nor, we may add, from Canadian speech): "I have my doubts", "the lend of", "A small (i.e. young) family", and so on.

The Canadian contributor to John Galt 1779-1979 begins his essay with what seems to be mandatory dialect of Canadian literary critics--genre jargon ("romantic tragi-comedy") and a quotation from Blake. Kenneth Costain's essay on The Entail however moves into a strong analysis of the comic analogues and parodies of Claud Walkinshaw. Even though the force of the book is diminished when tragic elements disappear after Claud Walkinshaw's death, Costain shows how retributive justice, working through fate, re-established a world which is benevolent, though peopled by limited human beings. The total plot thus drives toward a comic redemption.

Professor Costain's essay is the only one in the collection that makes a point of placing Galt in an international, archetypal range, relating his vision to that of the Romantics (especially Byron and Lockhart) and of such later writers as Hawthorne and George Eliot. The other essayists represented in John Galt 1779-1979 generally refuse to relate Galt even to such obvious rivals or influences as Burns, Scott, Hogg, or the young theological, or technical details, usefully increasing our enjoyment and admiration of Galt for his own unique qualities.

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