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John Galt: the Insider's Eye in the Age of Improvement, Urbanisation and Revolution

Christopher A Whatley

The more I read John Galt the more I become even more convinced than I was in 1979 that Galt has been shamefully neglected in Scotland.¹ Galt is worth reading and celebrating as a major Scottish writer. From the historian's perspective he is one of the most perceptive observers of Scottish society during the golden age of Scottish literary production. It was also in this period that Scotland's industrial or industrious revolution took place, when rural Scotland was undergoing the transformation that would create the orderly landscape we see nowadays in the Lowland countryside. Improvement is the catchall term for the process that was under way. It impacted on Scotland's towns, which grew at an unprecedented rate. They too saw substantial alterations in their shape and appearance, which in many places are still evident. Much of this change – the move to modernity – was influenced too by that phenomenon we sometimes compress into the term Enlightenment. Manifestations of this include the slow and uneven demise of the influence of custom (and prejudice) and the adoption of new ways of understanding and acting, based on observation and reason. Ordinary people became consumers as opposed to being mainly producers living on the margins of subsistence, and began to be more aware of and become actors in, movements for political change rather than defenders of the status quo.²

There are many kinds of primary sources that allow historians to identify and describe the main features of what was an extraordinary period in Scotland's history. But most of the time the sources are fragmentary. Necessarily, historians are writing from the outside, constrained by shifts in historiographical fashions and the perceptions and concerns of the present, and applying the benefits of hindsight. Significance and meaning are arrived at through deduction, in accordance with our own understanding of the topic or issue being investigated. This raises the question of how much convergence there is between what contemporaries thought was happening, and how historians understand the past. Or is history, as Voltaire asserted, 'nothing more than a pack of tricks that we play upon the dead'?³ Would those people from the past that historians confidently portray, recognise as authentic what has been written many decades or even centuries later, about their experiences, lifestyles, values or motivations?

What Galt offers the historian of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a voice from within, the insights of an insider's eye. This is important. There were other witnesses – who described aspects of the period, such as the authors of the county agricultural reports that were written at the turn of the nineteenth century. These though were deliberately quasi-scientific, and deal largely with land organisation, cultivation methods, crops and markets, but with people only in passing. The *Statistical Accounts* provide full records of parish life in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century, but again there is often a distance between the ministers who compiled the reports and what they could know about the lives and mind-sets of their parishioners. Many visitors left comments, but necessarily these are impressionistic. There are testimonies written by working people at the sharp end of the new more intensified manufacturing economy. But their focus is restricted, even if what they wrote could also be compelling.⁴ There are chroniclers of the period, men like George Penny of Perth who as an eye-witness left a closely observed account of life in that county town from around 1760 to 1830 – the period Galt covers.⁵ But Penny deals with only one place; Galt's canvas is much wider. Galt also has a finer eye for detail, is more perceptive and understands human beings and what they stood for and their foibles better than most of his contemporaries. He saw at first hand and perhaps above all engaged with some of the big challenges – and opportunities - of his time.⁶ These included the rapid and fundamental changes in rural and urban Scotland alluded to above. He was fully conscious of their social consequences. Amongst these were the potentially destabilising effects of new ways of

organising work and space on social relations and indeed the social order itself. Adding to the mix were influences and ideas emanating from overseas, not least the revolutions in America, France and elsewhere in Europe. Population growth too was occurring at higher rates than earlier, as did emigration, not least to North America – the attractions of which drew many enterprising Scots, including Galt himself. There were threats to Scotland's identity as a component part of the British union state, as well as to core elements of Scottish identity from within Scotland – for Galt primarily in the form of Walter Scott's writing which he feared might undermine Scotland's Presbyterian tradition and values, including the right of individuals to resist tyranny. Galt's response on this front – as someone whose west coast background was staunchly Presbyterian – was to write *Ringan Gilhaize*.⁷

Galt is usually described as a novelist, albeit one whose best-known 'novels' are firmly grounded in the social life of the countryside and small towns of later eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scotland – 'Provincial Scotland'.⁸ Literary critics have found much of merit in relation to Galt's capacities as a creative writer. Well known is that Galt was less keen to promote himself in this way. His earlier works were biographies, travelogues and provincial tales and sketches.⁹ It was with some trepidation that he added a fictional dimension to the documentary material with which he felt more secure.¹⁰ He readily admitted that neither *Annals of the Parish* nor *The Provost* had a plot, explaining instead that the two books were better understood as exemplars of 'a kind of local theoretical history'. Galt's interest was in the agencies and processes of improvement, and how this manifested itself in town and country.¹¹ Yet notwithstanding Galt's reservations about these works, critically they were a success, and achieved substantial sales.¹²

But clearly both *Annals* and *The Provost* are to different degrees works of imagination. Galt explained in his autobiographical *Literary Life* that some of the characters and incidents are almost entirely fictional. Rightly, in 1979, the late Ken Simpson went as far as to commend *Annals* as a 'major work of fiction [...] a consummate psychological study [...] and] a masterpiece of ironic writing'.¹³ In fact in the same volume (which I edited), I cast some doubt on the extent to which Galt could be relied upon as an historical source, notwithstanding the many critics who had credited Galt for just this quality in his work, and still do.¹⁴ With the arrogance of youth (I had just finished my PhD, on Ayrshire's industrialisation) I pointed out the inaccuracies in Galt's chronicle of his parish of Dalmailing, concluding that 'one could not better understand the development of any single parish through reading Galt's work'. Rather, I suggested, a mark of Galt's achievement was that he had created a world that readers were prepared to believe in.¹⁵ I was wrong, not because Galt had created a credible fictional world, but because *Annals* and *The Provost* are a brilliant representation of semi-rural, small town, provincial Scotland in the context of a growing industrious economy and Britain's expanding global empire, which Galt by his artistry brings to life. In fact his art intensifies their realism, much as a modern day TV dramatized documentary or (from a different perspective) a Ken Loach film can do.

Until relatively recently, the dominant paradigm for urban Scotland during the period Galt was writing about has been Glasgow and to a lesser extent other larger towns.¹⁶ Yet Glasgow is not Scotland and it certainly wasn't typical of most Scots' experience of urban life in Galt's lifetime. In 1801 almost twice as many people (around 156,600) lived in the ten Scottish towns that ranked immediately below Edinburgh and Glasgow than resided in Glasgow (with 84,100 inhabitants).¹⁷ The other model has been Edinburgh. Edinburgh, it has generally been assumed, was unique because of its role as Scotland's Enlightenment 'hotbed of genius', even if we now know that Glasgow shared in the Enlightenment ethos, as did Aberdeen.¹⁸ But what about Scotland's other towns – the smaller places? Urban historians know more about early modern Dundee now than a decade ago, but what about Alloa, Brechin, Dunfermline, Falkirk, or Inverness or Perth?¹⁹ The larger of these places were consistently amongst the country's top twelve towns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When Galt was active, urban Scotland was typified by manufacturing villages in country parishes (like Dalmailing)

and small burghs (like Gudetown). In 1821 just over 18 per cent of Scots lived in towns that housed between 2,500 and 9,999 people, compared to marginally under 18 per cent who resided either in the capital or other towns with populations over 10,000. Indeed not always appreciated is that more people lived in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants than in places twice this size and over.²⁰ Thirty-three towns had populations of between 2,000 and 5,000. In other words, many more Scots were familiar with places such as those that Galt drew his material from (Irvine and Greenock), than Edinburgh or Glasgow. What nowadays is categorised as provincial Scotland was in Galt's lifetime mainstream Scotland.

The deficiency in our understanding of provincial Scotland began to be addressed in 2009 by a small team of historians led by Professor Bob Harris, supported by the late Professor Charles McKean, the architectural historian, and myself, with funds from the AHRC. In this project, 'Scotland's Smaller Towns in the Era of the Enlightenment, 1745-1820', we looked at around thirty of Scotland's smaller towns - a cross section, by size, location, type and function. Many of the findings have appeared in print already, in article and chapter form.²¹ What this investigation revealed is how accurate and perceptive Galt was on the nature of urban improvement and its material and social impact. Despite being dependent in large part on what he knew about or gleaned from Irvine and to a lesser extent Greenock, his fictional parish of Dalmailing and burgh of Gudetown are nowhere specific. But this is Galt's achievement; they are everywhere. They are the ubiquitous smaller centres described in the previous paragraph. Galt in *Annals* and *The Provost*, and in his other works also, managed to capture the *zeitgeist* of rural and provincial Scotland in the era of improvement and Enlightenment. More so in Scotland than in England, Bob Harris has remarked, there was a 'shared urban consciousness', a common – national – sense of purpose and a fairly uniform direction of travel, born of a perception in elite circles that post-Union Scotland was lagging behind England and other parts of Europe.²² The inspiration for change probably came from south of the border as well as those parts of Europe achieving Scots knew best and sought to emulate – the Netherlands for example. The impetus however came from within, led by Whig improvers like Archibald Campbell, 3rd duke of Argyll whose influence over Scottish affairs from the 1720s until his death in 1761 was immense, backed by national improving agencies such as the Board of Trustees for Fisheries and Manufactures and the Bank of Scotland.²³

The blueprint for urban improvement may well have been the grandiose plan for Edinburgh's new town that was published in 1752 and disseminated by the Convention of Royal Burghs. The Convention had long acted as a vehicle for the exchange of ideas and mutual support for Scotland's burgh oligarchies, and certainly across the country's urban sector there emerged a kind of Whig-informed civic code of modernisation along with a widespread rejection of the 'feudal' past that was identified as one cause of Scotland's 'backwardness'.²⁴ Also around the time of the publication of the plans for Edinburgh in the mid eighteenth century, there can be discerned a new optimism amongst the middle ranking elites of Scotland's smaller towns, and a self-conscious engagement with what historians have defined as improvement.²⁵ Telling in relation to Galt and how he might have understood the contemporary urban environment, we have a report from his hometown, Greenock, that some time prior to 1800 William Sibbald, an architect, had produced a plan for the Clydeside town that was 'similar to that carried out in the New Town of Edinburgh by the same man in conjunction with Robert Reid.'²⁶

Another feature of the improvement 'movement' in later eighteenth century Scotland was a remarkable degree of self-conscious competition between towns. This included copycat behaviour in terms of the design of town houses, churches, and even the pervasive use of sash and case windows and slate roofs. The importance of emulation is well exemplified in *The Provost* when provost Pawkie reflects on his campaign for street lamps, a new innovation here as in most places. These would serve for the 'ornament and edification of the burgh' (a

phrase commonly used at the time), but what had motivated him was that such lamps were to be seen ‘in all well regulated cities and towns of any degree’.²⁷ But Galt goes further than this by highlighting real world examples of such inter-town rivalry. So in *The Ayrshire Legatees* for example, Miss Rachel Pringle writes in glowing terms about Ardrossan, the earl of Eglinton’s new town, a ‘monument [...] left there of his public spirit’ which in due course would become ‘a grand emporium’.²⁸ But, Miss Pringle reports, this is not the view of the people of the neighbouring town of Saltcoats, a ‘sordid race’ who complain that Ardrossan’s rise will be their ruin – a comment that reflects contemporary views on the comparative characteristics of the two places; one an aristocrat’s visionary planned town, the other a coal port and former salt manufacturing centre that had grown in fits and starts under the control of the Cunninghame’s of Auchenharrow.

Such competitiveness is conveyed too in some of the dialogue in *The Gathering of the West*, Galt’s account of the expedition of a party from the west of Scotland to Edinburgh for the visit of King George IV in 1822. Another marker of an improved town was that it should have pavements, usually made with flagstones, along the sides of the buildings and apart from the central carriageway – an innovation that required town councils to dissuade householders from tipping waste matter from their windows onto the street below, a long-established practice the stopping of which in turn removed the necessity for pedestrians to walk down the centre of the street. So in *The Provost* Galt devotes chapter XXVII to the issue of the plainstones, with Gudetown emulating Glasgow by paving the sides of the streets in this way, by which means the town, in provost Pawkie’s words, ‘has been greatly improved and inconvenienced’.²⁹ The sometimes snide and sharp-tongued narrator in *The Gathering of the West* who has one of his main characters, Mrs M’Auslan, visit a Greenock dressmaker, Miss Menie M’Neil, develops the theme further:

Whether there is any truth in the allegation of the Glasgow people, that nothing walks in the middle of the street but cows and Greenock folk, we shall for the present suppress our natural inclination to investigate the causes of a subject so interesting to philosophy and to state the important fact, that soon after breakfast Mrs M’Auslan was seen picking her steps along the crown of the causeway...[and notwithstanding the efforts of the town clerk in urging town councillors to improve the walkways], the side-pavements of Greenock seem still to have a natural predilection to continue in the same state [...].³⁰

But Galt is aware too that fashionable innovations had their downsides. The lamps provost Pawkie had erected ‘might reasonably have been thought...a terror to evil-doers’. In fact the reverse was true. Servant girls could now go out at night without the lanterns they carried by hand formerly; these were ‘kenspeckle commodities, and of course a check on every kind of gavaulling [carousing].’ Consequently, ‘out of the lamps sprung no little irregularity in the conduct of the servants’, much to the displeasure of those of their mistresses who would have preferred them not to have gone out, ‘when they could be more profitably employed at home.’³¹

Although Galt was obviously fond of Greenock, and preferred it to nearby Port Glasgow, ‘an insignificant town, with a steeple’, it was Glasgow – ‘that opulent metropolis of the muslin manufacturers’ – that astonished, while what impressed him about Edinburgh (if we can assume that the Rev Dr Pringle in the *Ayrshire Legatees* represented his thinking) was the orderly development of the New Town, ‘the houses grown up as if they were sown in the seed-time with the corn by a drilling machine, or dibbled in rigs and furrows like beans and potatoes.’³² By Galt’s metaphors are we taken deep into the mentality of his age and by inference learn – or to use that expressive Scottish word, *jalouse* - what for contemporaries was new and meaningful. And of what was desirable: which above all, was orderliness. Thus even a ladies’ slipper maker from Perth, Thomas Murie, on a recruiting mission with his volunteer regiment, the Royal Perthshire Militia, late in 1799, knew what to look for as he

journeyed through the Lowland towns. Kilmarnock he thought little of, as it ‘very irregular built [...] the streets narrow except at the Cross’. By contrast was Ayr, with its ‘regular built’ new town and ‘very handsome’ new bridge, its ‘several streets well paved & lighted’, the main one from the bridge being ‘the most public part [...] the best inhabitants dwell in it & the most of the merchants has their shops there.’ As with Galt, it was Glasgow that most impressed Murie. The capital of the west of Scotland was ‘elegantly built upon a regular plan’, with wide streets ‘paved & lighted on both sides & straight.’³³

What Galt provides us with, based on his own first hand knowledge as an observer but also as a participant in the business and associational life of Greenock, are unique insights into the thought processes of his characters. Galt understood that the main driver behind urban improvement was commerce and the prospect of gain.³⁴ Scotland’s towns were above all else, a locus for money making. For towns as collective bodies a governing principle was ‘to do whatever was necessary to sustain economic progress.’³⁵ Accordingly, when narrows or closes were widened, streets straightened, and market crosses moved (all of which measures Galt describes and explores), the main motive was to ease the flow of traffic and transport, to facilitate access to and from markets, within and beyond the respective towns. This is not to say that elegance and ornamentation were of no consequence. If the economic and commercial ethic of the age led the change process, there was a place too for ‘visual aggrandisement.’³⁶ Enlightenment values and culture incorporated a concern for ‘ornament’ alongside utility and the requirement for order and regularity. That is towns organised along rational lines: industrious places that were also sociable, humane and urbane.³⁷ Galt’s ideal.

Improvement was in the hands of private individuals – in *The Provost* represented initially by the aptly named Baillie Andrew McLucre – ‘a greedy body’ according to our narrator. McLucre had his counterparts in the real world of Scotland’s later eighteenth century towns: the entrepreneurial middling sort. For anyone who cares to look, they readily spring from the voluminous archives of Scotland’s burgh councils. Most funding for improvement projects came not from the public purse, but from the purses of the public.³⁸ Several town councils in Scotland were, by the early nineteenth century, bankrupt.³⁹ Burgh indebtedness too was commonplace, often the result of over-ambitious or, more often, ill-planned improvement schemes. Corruption and jobbery contributed too, along with long-term financial mismanagement and downright incompetence on the part of burgh magistrates and councils. Indeed burgh reform and effective financial management were important items on the improvement agenda.⁴⁰ Entirely believable therefore, despite sounding far-fetched, is Provost Pawkie’s account of how he increased town revenues by building a new toll bridge, but then created enormous difficulties for his successors as they were unable to pay the five per cent interest on the capital after road traffic declined with the arrival of peace after the war with France ended in 1815.⁴¹ Again the example is revealing: bridge building was a regular feature of the improvement process, the older medieval structures being too weak or narrow for the increase in wheeled traffic that occurred in the later eighteenth century.

Another pressing issue for townspeople was the proprietorship and use of common land. Prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numerous Scottish burghs had portions of common ground, either owned by the town itself or granted for the use of the inhabitants by a neighbouring landowner. Such land was utilised for a variety of purposes – as a source of kindling for their fires or of peat, and somewhere town dwellers could acquire turf and stone for building. It could be used by favoured burgesses to graze their sheep and cattle, and sometimes for sports and games and urban ceremonials.⁴² In the eighteenth century however town councils became increasingly aware of the commercial value of their holdings, and of the need to generate additional revenue to support their civic ambitions. Consequently, they discouraged customary usage of the towns’ commons, and either sold it, or leased it out to rent-paying tenants - often in the face of fierce opposition from those townspeople who had formerly had access to the common land and valued its advantages. In Gudetown in *The Provost* we find provost Pawkie and his fellow civic governor the aforementioned baillie

McLucre enclosing and improving fifty acres of the town's moor, with McLucre subsequently obtaining, at an 'easy rate' a lease of the ground for 999 years. Carried out in the name of improvement, and in Pawkie's eyes a demonstrable success, there was however a counter-reaction. Galt's text runs as follows: 'But to the best of actions there will be adverse and discontented spirits; and, on this occasion, there were not wanting persons naturally of a disloyal opposition temper, who complained of the enclosure as a usurpation of the rights and property of the poorer burghers.'⁴³ We now know, from looking at historical evidence such as council minutes and court records that this was how such measures were viewed, and received by the 'people below', throughout much of urban Scotland. In Irvine, Ayr and Hawick there were objections as well as appeals to the Court of Session on just the grounds that Galt describes. In Irvine the divide lay between the commercially ambitious merchants whose wish was to lease the land for industrial and other revenue-generating purposes (something which also benefited the town council), and on the other hand the more conservative trades incorporations, whose inclination was to protect the interests of their small master members, journeymen and the burgh's poorer inhabitants.⁴⁴

Galt also casts light on improvement as an attitude of mind, which had cultural ramifications. Linked with this were ideas of acceptable social behaviour, and what constituted polite society. In part this required civic leaders and the more affluent inhabitants of towns to withdraw from older, traditional activities and behaviours. For instance, their involvement in certain sorts of the more rumbustious civic ceremonials that had punctuated the town's annual cycle – fairs, sports or, most spectacularly, the king's birthday celebrations. Instead, urban elites were expected – and sought - to engage in more sober pursuits, like genteel balls, and literary and debating societies, associational activity we know that Galt himself pursued. Indeed social life was overwhelmingly associational; clubs and societies abounded, even in the smaller places. Most towns had at least one Masonic lodge; many had several.⁴⁵ Numerous too, more so it seems than England, were subscription and circulating libraries – which added to the towns' serious character, but were also the principal means by which Enlightenment ideas and cultural values percolated through to provincial Scotland. It is no surprise then that John Galt was a member of Greenock's subscription library. And of course, in some places, especially the weaving centres (including new cotton mill settlements like Galt's Cayenneville – or real world Catrine in Ayrshire), bookshops and newspapers were the route-way to radicalism, as the nervous, Tory-inclined Galt makes clear in *The Provost*. Pawkie declared himself 'exceedingly troubled' that a newspaper was to be published in Gudetown. That its ethos was to be liberal was no comfort; promoted by 'hands not altogether clean of the coom of jacobinical democracy', Pawkie felt it necessary to intervene and turn the paper into a loyalist organ.⁴⁶ The fear there was of the unchecked flow of ideas that in any way challenged the existing establishment during the era of the French Revolution is something that once more recent historical research has confirmed; it explains for example the series of steep increases in taxes on newspapers in the 1790s.⁴⁷ Anxiety about threats to the social order in general – which we see throughout provost Pawkie's career but which was also a recurring concern for Galt - was why in addition to their interest in efficiency, urban authorities attempted to reduce the number of fairs and where possible relocate them to the fringes of the town, as well as to reduce other opportunities there were for large-scale disorder.

The presumption might be that Galt included a chapter on the king's birthday proceedings simply for literary effect. Indeed until the 1990s, when historians began to look more closely at the king's birthday in Scotland, Galt's account, to which he devotes one of his longer chapters, could well be seen in this light. Perhaps even more picaresque are the opening pages of *Annals* where Mr Balwhidder was met with an angry mob as he tried to answer the call from his new charge, and had to endure the humiliation of crawling into his church through a window. A few years ago readers might be excused for concluding that Galt had included this incident as an instance of mildly comic relief, and certainly it has the effect of 'diminishing the authority readers might be tempted to [...] attribute to the figure of a minister'.⁴⁸ Yet we

know now - following Callum Brown's work on protest over church patronage in Scotland, that riots directed against unpopular new ministers, notably those who were appointed by landed patrons (in the case of Dalmailing the Laird of Breadlands) and against the wishes of the local heritors and elders and above all the ordinary parishioners, were the most common form of popular protest in rural Scotland in the eighteenth century.⁴⁹

Similarly, Galt's narration of the meal riot in Gudetown might seem exaggerated. After all the price of a peck of meal had only been increased by one penny. However what modern research has shown is that it was just such a variance from the norm that sparked meal riots. Work I've published elsewhere has shown that in the mid-1790s rioting broke out in many parts of Scotland when the price of a peck of meal rose much above a shilling or a shilling and a penny, the price that had been paid for several decades.⁵⁰ In 1796, during a period of shortage in Peterhead, the town's volunteers issued a warning to the magistrates not to admit soldiers as they would force up the price of meal. The volunteers' written demand to this effect ends with the words, 'Meal at one Shilling per peck, God Save the King'. Similarly in Macduff, rioters there would only allow grain to be shipped from the port if the burgh's magistrates could obtain meal for the inhabitants at the same price, that is one shilling.⁵¹ What Galt offers are vivid fictional constructions, drawn from close observation, of Edward Thompson's historical conception of the early modern crowd's or populace's 'moral economy'.⁵² Thompson's seminal essay on this subject was published in 1971, *The Provost* in 1822, around 150 years earlier. In fact in every other detail Galt's account of food rioting, in which each carefully chosen word and phrase add meaning, matches what we learn from more traditional and usually much less colourful sources.

If we turn now to the measures the town authorities adopted to pre-empt disturbances of this kind, again what is revealed is the pinpoint accuracy of Galt's portrayals. Thus in Chapter XXXIX of *Annals of the Parish*, which deals with the year 1798, we learn that owing to the poor spring a scanty harvest is likely. This is turn persuaded Mr Cayenne, a leading merchant to buy and import to Irville from America and the Baltic additional supplies of grain from which, when the time came, he made a substantial profit by selling this to the better-off inhabitants of Dalmailing at inflated prices. Slipped into the text (and easily skipped over) is the remark, 'Some of the neighbouring parishes, however, were angry that he [Mr Cayenne] would not serve them likewise, and called him a wicked and extortionate forestaller; but he made it plain to the Meanest capacity, that if he did not circumscribe his dispensation to our own bounds it would be as nothing.'⁵³ A minor matter apparently, yet what Galt is alluding to here is actually one of the most controversial issues in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century. This was the centuries-old right that burghs and parishes and counties had to block the movement of grain and meal out of their own vicinity in times of shortage, the aim being to secure the supply of staple foodstuffs for their own inhabitants. Indeed so important was this matter that it went to the Court of Session where in 1801 Lord Meadowbank ruled that the ancient custom should be swept away. To do otherwise and to allow burgh magistrates to retain meal exclusively for the use of their own people, the pursuer in the case argued, threatened the commercial system itself. Drawing on the work of the late economic theorist and moral philosopher Adam Smith in his plea, what epithet, he asked rhetorically, would Smith have applied 'to the interference of a magistrate, whose limited and local knowledge but ill qualifies him for regulating the affairs of a great nation'.⁵⁴ The paper (see endnote 50) that drew attention to this enormously significant but largely overlooked legal case and judgement was published in 2012: Galt was onto the vexed subject long before that.

In theory, the king's birthday was the occasion when the urban community united to demonstrate its loyalty to the reigning monarch. For most of Galt's lifetime this was King George III, whose birthday was celebrated on 4th June. Usually the celebrations began with a formal procession, with the great and the good leading the way, not only the a town's provost and magistrates but also other authority figures such as the minister or ministers, senior army

officers, supervisors of the customs and excise, lawyers and leading citizens such as merchants and physicians. Anyone who was particularly unpopular was therefore in a highly exposed position as the procession walked in front of or even through a large crowd of the town's inhabitants.⁵⁵ In provost Pawkie's Gudetown, the objects of the crowd's wrath are the aptly-named Mr Firlot, a profiteering grain merchant, and Mr Stoup, an overly-zealous and again tellingly-named customs officer. The cause of the general unease that culminated in the Gudetown riot was the town council's decision to stop the time-honoured distribution of free coals for the bonfire. This action was considered, as reported by Pawkie, to be 'a heinous trespass on the liberties and privileges of the people' – in other words unwarranted attack on popular custom. Yet what happened in fictional Gudetown was by no means exceptional; throughout urban Scotland the 4th of June was becoming a major problem for civic heads. There follows a quotation from the minutes of Montrose town council in June 1786, a week or so after that year's proceedings: 'The council, considering that the practice on the King's birthday of drinking his Majesty's health at the cross is attended with much inconvenience, and that the custom is given up in most other burghs [emulation again] the Council abolish that practice in time coming and resolve that for the future the company shall meet at the Provost's house and proceed directly to the Town Hall to celebrate the anniversary.'⁵⁶ Notwithstanding such declarations of good intent, several decades were to pass before the social confrontations and violence associated with the monarch's birthday holiday were eliminated.

Galt's selection of a grain merchant and a customs officer is deliberate and astute: across Lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century it was men from these two occupations who were most commonly resented and most often the object of verbal abuse and physical assault.⁵⁷ Both carried the risk – especially when communities were under stress – of transgressing the mainly unspoken but popularly understood rules of the moral economy and suffering the consequences of so doing. The targeting of men like Firlot and Stoup was unfair according to Galt's narrator in *Annals*, who makes clear that he sees nothing wrong with the fact that a merchant-manufacturer such as Mr Cayenne make a profit from his business activities which included job creation and ensuring a decent supply of meal. In this respect Galt highlights the very real tension still prevalent during his lifetime that was caused by the competing pulls of commercialising, modernising Scotland, and the sheet anchor of tradition.

The point is reinforced if we return to the king's birthday. Not only were the crowd's passions fuelled by copious quantities of free drink. Those present also had access to the weapons of the weak: fire and fireworks, burning tar barrels, and also the flotsam and jetsam of the street, stones and mud. Stray animals, mainly cats and dogs could also be employed, stretched grotesquely as they were thrown around, finishing round the neck of a hapless magistrate. The world was turned upside down, and for a time anyway, disorder – and the people below - reigned supreme.⁵⁸ In capturing all this but also describing the circumstances that resulted in disorder Galt has his finger on a pulse that was beating across urban Scotland. In words he describes what the artist David Octavia Hill captured visually in his closely observed and finely detailed engraving of the king's birthday in Perth in 1819.⁵⁹



How right therefore was the anonymous editor of the edition of *Annals* and the *Ayrshire Legatees* published by MacLaren & Company late in the nineteenth century when he concluded that in his earlier works Galt had 'bequeathed to posterity a faithful record...[of] those national manners, habits of thought and modes of expression' that existed a century earlier; their merit the same writer went on, lay not in 'ingenious intricacy of incident, or evolvment of story', but 'in reflecting realities as nearly and truthfully as possible'.⁶⁰

Galt's fictional writing is more though than an accurately observed record of his times, invaluable as this is for historians and other students of the period that was his main focus. By applying a series of literary devices, from the choice of names he gives to his characters – 'name types', to the way the thoughts and words of his characters reveal contemporary attitudes, Galt immerses us more deeply into his world than is possible for most historians to do.⁶¹ But also buried within his writing is to be found Galt the political activist, a man whose purpose was to guide behaviour. He was also a social theorist.⁶² Along with Sir Walter Scott and many of his conservative contemporaries, Galt was, as we have seen already, alarmed by the activities of Scotland's radicals. His responses are to be found not only in *Annals* and *The Provost* but also *Lawrie Todd* and *The Gathering of the West*. The *Gathering* was first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1823, not long after the shock for the authorities of the so-called Radical War of 1820. The reverberations from this, including popular disturbances, continued to cause alarm for some time afterwards. Working class resentment over the radicals' defeat was intense, and manifested as rioting in places with which Galt was familiar: Glasgow, Paisley, Port Glasgow and Greenock.⁶³ Of all this Galt seems to have been acutely aware; hence his attempts to counter what many feared was the prelude to revolution. In the *Gathering*, ostensibly about the King's visit to Edinburgh although underlain by concerns about the Radical challenge, Galt cleverly uses a variety of devices both overt and subtle to drive home his message.

There is direct attack, with the condemnation of Paisley's weavers as members of a sedentary occupation who like all other 'indoor artizans' were 'particularly subject to the moral flatulency of hypothetical ideas.'⁶⁴ Galt then goes on to contrast the radical weavers' response to the news of the King's imminent arrival in Scotland with the 'lively excitement' and 'impulses of loyal curiosity' that moved the 'bustling, ruddy, maritime Greenock folks' to

contribute to the festivities being planned to greet the king. Then there are the names given to some of the more prominent of them, like Clattering Tam, a 'thorough and engrained radical' who was 'an eminent member of the Radical Association', and the wonderfully evoked 'auld gash-gabbit Jamie o' the Sneddon', that is Paisley's well-known weaving suburb. There are sly descriptions too, as when just after his reference to the 'ruddy' inhabitants of Greenock, we come upon the 'pale-faced' Paisley weavers. Unhealthy bodies, unhealthy minds?

He resorts too to ridicule – the more effective for readers at the time as it was directed towards a practice that had its roots in a type of protest British radicals in the 1820s (and Chartists in the 1830s) adopted: abstention from taxed goods, including alcohol, tea, coffee and sugar.⁶⁵ Galt describes a 'patriotic band of weavers' wives, who around 1820 stopped drinking tea and other excisable commodities in order to deny the government a source of revenue, 'in conformity to which, and actuated by the frenzy of the times, they seized their teapots, and marching them in procession to the bridge, sacrificed them to the Goddess of Reform, by dashing them, with uplifted arms and an intrepid energy, into the river' – before then ratifying their 'solemn vows' with 'copious libations of smuggled whisky.'⁶⁶ To abjure tea drinking then is no hardship for Paisley's wild and lawless whisky drinking women.

There is ridicule too in the manner with which Galt treats the weavers' demands for the King to come to Paisley and perhaps even settle in Scotland. The text points to the recognition by some of the shrewder weavers that such a visit, even if short, would be good for trade. The narrator refers also to the 'recent process of their ingenuity', that is the notion, obviously mistaken, that somehow the fluctuations in trade were caused by 'the ancient and unaltered institutions of King, Lords and Commons.' Although Galt is not unsympathetic to some of the weavers' criticisms – of Parliament, for instance, as 'the rotten carcass o' British liberty', the delusions of the weaver hot heads are contrasted with the wiser words of one of their more reasonable brethren, Peter Gauze. Compared with the others Gauze was 'one of those clever and shrewd fellows who, by the exercise of their natural sagacity, rise from the loom into the warehouse, and ultimately animate the vast machinery of the cotton-mills'.⁶⁷ Representative of the emerging Scottish ideal of the hard working, self made man, it is through Gauze that the voice of reason is heard. Neatly dressed (unlike the others), Gauze advises his fellow weavers – using language and metaphors Galt's intended audience would readily understand – to abandon their plan to go and see the King in Edinburgh as a deputation. This would hardly entice the King to Paisley: 'it wouldna look weel', says Gauze, 'considering the natural objection of the government to committees among the people for political purposes'. Better to travel to Edinburgh as individuals, and as members of the community at large. After crushing Tam in argument, and watching him slope off, mocked by his erstwhile weaver brothers, Gauze continues his critique of the radicals' methods. Thus he flatters his audience by acknowledging their craft skills, but then turns this to advantage by arguing that:

it's as necessary for a man to serve an apprenticeship in the art of law-making, as in the weaving o' muslin. For though the King and his Lords and Commons aiblins ken the uses and the ways o' the shuttle and the tredles, just as we do councils and parliaments, they would make a poor hand in the practice; and I doubt we would ravel the yairn, and spoil the pirns o' government, were we to meddle wi' them.' Common folk should know their place, and win favour from the King by being respectful; good behaviour will induce good legislation.

There is no more compelling or more humane – by which I mean empathetic – writer on the towns and townspeople of Scotland during the dramatic period about which he writes, than John Galt.

- ¹ See Christopher A. Whatley, 'Annals of the Parish and History' in C. Whatley (ed.), *John Galt 1779-1979* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979), pp.51-63.
- ² See C. J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), A. Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), and C. A. Whatley, *Scottish Society, 1707-1830: Beyond Jacobitism, towards industrialisation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000).
- ³ There is a fascinating discussion on this aspect of the historian's dilemma by A. J. Youngson in his *The Prince and the Pretender: A Study in the Writing of History* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1985).
- ⁴ Whatley, *Scottish Society*, p.236.
- ⁵ G. Penny, *Traditions of Perth* (Coupar Angus: Culross & Son, 1986 ed.).
- ⁶ E. Frykman, *John Galt's Scottish Stories, 1820-1823* (Uppsala: A. B. Ludequitska Bokhandeln, 1959), pp. 187-218.
- ⁷ D. Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), p.149.
- ⁸ F. R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: John Murray, 1978), pp.31-52.
- ⁹ M. Bohrer, 'John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* and the narrative strategies of tales of locale', in Regina Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt, Observations & Conjectures on Literature, History and Society* (Lewisburg Pa: Bucknell University Press, 2012), pp.95-118.
- ¹⁰ Frykman, *John Galt's Scottish Stories*, p.220.
- ¹¹ J. Galt, *The Literary Life, and Miscellanies, in Three Volumes* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1834; General Books ed., 2009), pp.75-8, 110.
- ¹² I. Gordon, *John Galt: The Life of a Writer* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1972), pp.42-54.
- ¹³ K. G. Simpson, 'Ironic self-revelation in *Annals of the Parish*', in Whatley, *John Galt*, p.65.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Gordon, *John Galt*; and I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).
- ¹⁵ C. A. Whatley, 'Annals of the Parish and history', in Whatley, ed., *John Galt*, pp.52-3.
- ¹⁶ For an example of this tendency see T. M. Devine, 'Urbanisation', in T. M. Devine and R. Mitchison (eds), *People and Society in Scotland, Volume I, 1760-1830* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1988), pp.27-52; and the same author's 'Scotland', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Volume II, 1540-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), pp.151-64.
- ¹⁷ Calculated from data in I. D. Whyte, 'Scottish and Irish urbanization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a comparative perspective' in S. J. Connolly, R. A. Houston and R. J. Morris (eds), *Conflict, Identity and Economic Development: Ireland and Scotland, 1600-1939* (Preston: Carnegie Publishing, 1995), p.24.
- ¹⁸ D. Daiches, P. Jones and J. Jones (eds), *A Hotbed of Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment, 1730-1790* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1986); A. Hook and R. Sher (eds), *The Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997); J. J. Carter (ed.), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2002).
- ¹⁹ On Dundee see C. McKean, B. Harris and C. A. Whatley (eds), *Dundee: Renaissance to Enlightenment* (Dundee: Dundee UP, 2009).
- ²⁰ I. D. Whyte, 'Urbanisation', in T. M. Devine and J. R. Young (eds), *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), pp.176-94.
- ²¹ B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment, 1740-1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014).
- ²² Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, p.4.
- ²³ See R. L. Emerson, *An Enlightened Duke: The Life of Archibald Campbell (1682-1761), Earl of Ilay, 3rd Duke of Argyll* (Kilkerran: humming earth, 2013).
- ²⁴ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.82-3; C. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp.129-84.
- ²⁵ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.7, 104.
- ²⁶ T. W. Hamilton, *How Greenock Grew* (Greenock, 1947), 19.
- ²⁷ John Galt, *The Provost and Other Tales* (London: MacLaren and Co., n.d.), p.78.
- ²⁸ John Galt, *Annals of the Parish and The Ayrshire Legatees* (London: MacLaren and Co., n.d.), pp.169-70
- ²⁹ Galt, *The Provost*, p.80.
- ³⁰ John Galt, *The Gathering of the West* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and T. Cadell, 1823), pp.14-15.
- ³¹ Galt, *The Provost*, p.108.
- ³² Galt, *Annals of the Parish and The Ayrshire Legatees*, p.173.

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- ³³ Perth and Kinross Council Archives, MS 14/16/3, Diary of Thomas Murie, pp.6-7, 11-12.
- ³⁴ For an illuminating study of *Annals* as a Whiggish ‘manifesto for growth and progress’, but tempered by the constraints of community (or ‘the Burkean ballast’ of the Rev Micah Balwhidder), see Bohrer, ‘John Galt’s *Annals of the Parish*’, esp. pp.106-118.
- ³⁵ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.109, 114.
- ³⁶ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, p.104.
- ³⁷ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, p.7.
- ³⁸ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, p.131.
- ³⁹ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.123-7.
- ⁴⁰ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.126-7.
- ⁴¹ Galt, *The Provost*, pp.136-7.
- ⁴² Whatley, *Scottish Society*, p.76.
- ⁴³ Galt, *The Provost*, p.25.
- ⁴⁴ Whatley, *Scottish Society*, pp.155, 159; see too K. R. Bogle, *Scotland’s Common Ridings* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), pp.87-101.
- ⁴⁵ Harris and McKean, *Scottish Town*, pp.190-1, 442-3.
- ⁴⁶ Galt, *The Provost*, pp.112-5.
- ⁴⁷ C. A. Whatley, ‘Roots of 1790s Radicalism: Reviewing the Economic and Social Background’, in B. Harris (ed.), *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2005), pp.30-6; B. Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), pp. 45-6.
- ⁴⁸ Bohrer, ‘John Galt’s *Annals of the Parish*’, p.104.
- ⁴⁹ C. G. Brown, ‘Protest in the Pews: Interpreting Presbyterianism and Society in Fracture During the Scottish Economic Revolution’, in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society 1700-1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990), pp.97-99.
- ⁵⁰ C. A. Whatley, ‘Custom, Commerce and Lord Meadowbank: the Management of the Meal Market in Urban Scotland, c.1740-c.1820’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 32, 1 (2012), pp.1-27.
- ⁵¹ National Records of Scotland, Justiciary Court Records, JC26/287, JC26/297.
- ⁵² See E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.185-258.
- ⁵³ Galt, *Annals*, p.131.
- ⁵⁴ Whatley, ‘Lord Meadowbank’, p.2.
- ⁵⁵ C. A. Whatley, ‘Royal Day, People’s Day: The Monarch’s Birthday in Scotland, c.1660-1860’, in R. Mason and N. Macdougall (eds), *People and Power in Scotland: Essays in Honour of T C Smout* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992), pp.170-88.
- ⁵⁶ Angus Archives, M1/1/9, 14 June 1786.
- ⁵⁷ Whatley, *Scottish Society*, pp.160-4, 170-4.
- ⁵⁸ C. A. Whatley, ‘“The privilege which the rabble have to be riotous”: carnivalesque and the monarch’s birthday in Scotland, c.1700-1860’, in I. Blanchard (ed.), *Labour and Leisure in Historical Perspective, Thirteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1994), pp.89-100.
- ⁵⁹ The picture was published in S. Cowan, *The Ancient Capital of Scotland* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1904).
- ⁶⁰ ‘Biographical Memoir’, in J. Galt, *Annals of the Parish and the Ayrshire Legatees* (London: Maclaren & Co., n.d.), pp.xxvi-xxvii.
- ⁶¹ For a helpful if brief discussion of Galt’s utilization of type-names, see H. B. de Groot, ‘Public Benefits and Private Gains: The Provost and The Member’, in Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt*, pp.283-7.
- ⁶² R. Hewitt, ‘John Galt, Harriet Martineau, and the Role of Social Theorist’, in Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt*, pp.345-72.
- ⁶³ Whatley, *Scottish Society*, pp.324-7.
- ⁶⁴ Galt, *Gathering of the West*, p.28.
- ⁶⁵ M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp.62, 147.
- ⁶⁶ Galt, *Gathering of the West*, p.27.
- ⁶⁷ Galt, *Gathering of the West*, p.33.