'John Galt and Scottish Social History in the Era of Enlightenment and Urbanisation'

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I should begin by saying that I'm grateful to the organisers of today's event for inviting me to speak today. It's enormously gratifying that the slim volume of essays on John Galt I edited way back in 1979 to mark the bi-centenary of Galt's birth hasn't been entirely forgotten.[1]

But of more importance is the future, and the opportunity the establishment of the John Galt society creates to act as a focus for those of us who are Galt enthusiasts. But a John Galt society can be much more than a forum for discussion. It can be a powerhouse for the study of John Galt's incredibly interesting life and remarkable literary work, a magnet for bringing together Galt readers and literary critics and galvanising us individually and collectively to embark on the serious research projects Galt merits. This isn't to overlook the splendid academic work on Galt that's been done over the past three decades or so, in Scotland but also in Canada and elsewhere.[2] It is however to acknowledge that there is room for a lot more, and not simply as there's a gap to fill, an opportunity for yet another Masters or PhD thesis, or a for a research council grant, significant as these things are.

The more I read Galt – and over the years I've returned to him again and again, but never I have to confess to work on him systematically – so I become even more convinced than I was in 1979 that Galt has been shamefully neglected as a writer in Scotland. So another reason I'm delighted to be here today as part of the inauguration of the John Galt society is because this may well mark the opening in a new and productive phase in what we might call John Galt studies, and the main means by which Galt is better understood and appreciated. But more than this, it should be the vehicle by which Galt is far better known, in Scotland the land of his birth but also south of the border where he also worked and about which he also wrote some powerful material, not least on the British political system in brilliant exposes of its failings such as his novel *The Member*, published in 1832.

But we shouldn't overlook the part the society can play in *celebrating* Galt – as we do Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, who currently are his much better known contemporaries, a fact – and failure in our (the Scots) collective memory - that has recently been underlined by Gerard Carruthers.[3] I hope that as I proceed this morning, it will become clear why Galt is worth commemorating as a major Scottish writer and one of the most acute observers of Scottish society as it was during this golden age of Scottish literary production.

So what is it about Galt that causes me to be so enthusiastic about him? As the chairman has intimated, I'm an historian, of Scotland, with most of my published work having been focussed on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular I've been interested in the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century - because it was this period when, in effect, modern Scotland emerged – that is the Scotland with which we are familiar. It was during these decades that Scotland's industrial or industrious revolution took place, when rural Scotland was transformed to create the orderly landscape we see nowadays in the Lowland countryside and the coastal settlements in the Highlands; when towns in Scotland began to grow at an unprecedented rate and altered too in their shape and appearance – much of which is still recognisable. It was when under the influence of that phenomenon we sometimes compress into the term the Enlightenment, Scotland saw the slow demise of the

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[1] C. A. Whatley (ed.), *John Galt, 1779-1979* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979).
[2] Most recently, the splendid *John Galt: Observations and Conjectures on Literature, History and Society* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2012), edited by Regina Hewitt.
[3] G. Carruthers, 'Remembering John Galt', in Hewitt (ed.), *John* Galt, pp.33-52.

influence of custom (and prejudice) and the adoption of new ways of understanding and acting, based on observation and reason; when 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.[4]

There are all sorts of primary sources that allow us to identify and describe these features of change and numerous historians have attempted to measure their significance and account for them. But most of the time the primary sources are fragmentary, while the historians are writing from the outside, constrained by shifts in historiographical fashions and the perceptions and concerns of the present, albeit with the benefits of hindsight. In short we find meaning by inference, in accordance with our own understanding of the topic or issue or period in question.

At one level this causes me to wonder sometimes 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'?[5] One of the things I've asked myself during periods of self-doubt and even of existential soul-searching during my adult lifetime as a social historian is this: would those people I've been writing about have recognised as authentic anything I've said about their lifestyles, their experiences or their motivations? But this isn't the time or place to wrestle with issues of historical practice or worth.

What it seems to me that Galt offers – uniquely because he was alive during the period I'm interested in - is a voice from within and the insights of an insider. There were other witnesses – who describe aspects of the period, like the writers of the county agricultural reports for example, but these are deliberately quasi-scientific, and deal with crops and land organisation, and with people only in passing. The *Statistical Accounts* are also full records of parish life in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century, but again there's often a distance between the ministers who compiled the reports and what is being reported. There are chroniclers of the period, men like George Penny of Perth who as a first-hand witness left a closely observed account of life in that town from around 1760 to 1830 – the period Galt covers.[6] But Penny deals with only one place; Galt's canvas is much wider. But Galt is I think was closer to the ground, has a finer eye for detail, is more perceptive and understands people and what they stood for and their foibles better than most of his contemporaries.

What's important too is that he was aware of, saw at first hand and perhaps above all engaged with some of the big issues of his time.[7] These included rapid and fundamental change in rural and urban Scotland, the causes of this and its social consequences; the destabilising effects of fundamental change on social relations and indeed for the social order and, related to this, the potentially dangerous influence of ideas from and events happening overseas, not least the revolutions in France and elsewhere in Europe; population growth and emigration

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[4] 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).

[5] 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).

[6] G. Penny, *Traditions of Perth* (Coupar Angus: Culross & Son, 1986 ed.).

[7] E. Frykman, *John Galt's Scottish Stories, 1820-1823* (Uppsala: A. B. Ludequitska Bokhandeln, 1959), pp. 187-218.

and the potential of North America for enterprising Scots; challenges to Scottish identity within the British union state; and threats to core elements of Scottish identity from within Scotland – primarily in the shape of Walter Scott's writing which Galt saw as undermining Scotland's Presbyterian tradition and values, including the right of individuals to resist tyranny. His response – as someone whose west coast background was staunchly Presbyterian - was to write *Ringan Gilhaize*.[8]

Galt is usually defined 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.[9] And literary critics have found much of merit in relation to Galt's capacities as a creative writer. As we know though, Galt was less keen to promote himself in this way, certainly as far as his earlier works were concerned, preferring biographies, travel writing and provincial tales and sketches.[10] His first publications were of a factual nature, and it was with some trepidation that he added a fictional dimension to the documentary material with which he felt more secure.[11] He readily admitted that neither *Annals of the Parish* nor *The Provost* had a plot, explaining instead that the two books are 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.[12] Notwithstanding Galt's reservations about the nature of these works, critically they were a success, and achieved considerable sales.[13]

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 in both are almost entirely fictional. And to great effect. 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'.[14]

But in the very same volume in which Ken Simpson wrote so eloquently about Galt's accomplishment as a novelist, the editor – me - was inclined to 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.[15] With the arrogance of youth I proceeded to demonstrate 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', grudgingly conceding instead that a mark of Galt's achievement was that he'd created a world that readers were prepared to believe in.[16]

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[8] D. Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), p.149.
[9] F. R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: John Murray, 1978), pp.31-52.
[10] M. Bohrer, 'John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* and the narrative strategies of tales of locale', in Hewitt, *John Galt*, pp.95-118.
[11] Fryman, *John Galt's Scottish Stories*, p.220.
[12] J. Galt, *The Literary Life, and Miscellanies, in Three Volumes* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1834; General Books ed., 2009), pp.75-8, 110.
[13] I. Gordon, *John Galt: The life of a writer* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1972), pp.42-54.
[14] K. G. Simpson, 'Ironic self-revelation in *Annals of the Parish*', in Whatley, *John Galt*, p.65.
[15] See, for example, Gordon, *John Galt*; and I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).
[16] C. A. Whatley, '*Annals of the Parish* and history', in Whatley, ed., *John Galt*, pp.52-3.

But I was wrong, not because Galt had created a credible fictional world, but because between them *Annals* and *The Provost* are a brilliant chronicle of semi-rural, small town, provincial Scotland in the context of a growing industrious economy and Britain's expanding global empire in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which Galt by his artistry brings to life – in fact his art intensifies their realism. Indeed so good are these works – along with others which touch on similar issues (such as *The Steamboat*), that it's only now that historians of Scotland's towns – urban historians, the focus here - are starting to catch up with Galt.

I say this for the following reasons. Until relatively recently, the dominant paradigm for urban Scotland during the period Galt was writing about has been Glasgow and to a lesser extent the other larger towns.[17] Yet – and I mean no disrespect to this marvellous city - Glasgow isn't Scotland and it certainly wasn't typical of most Scots' experience of urban life in Galt's lifetime. Almost twice as many people (around 156,600) lived in ten of Scotland's towns that ranked immediately below Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1801 than lived in Glasgow (with 84,100 inhabitants).[18] The other model has been Edinburgh. Edinburgh, it's generally been assumed, was unique because of its role as the Enlightenment 'hotbed of genius', even if we now know that Glasgow shared in the Enlightenment ethos, as did Aberdeen.[19] But what about Scotland's other towns – the smaller places? Urban historians better know early modern Dundee now than a decade ago,[20] but what about Alloa and Brechin, and Dunfermline and Falkirk, or Inverness or Perth, several of which were consistently amongst the country's top twelve towns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?

At the time Galt was writing, urban Scotland was typified by villages in country parishes like Dalmailing – really an industrial or manufacturing village of which there were many, and small towns – 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 what's not always appreciated is that more people lived in places with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants than in places twice this size and above.[21] Thirty-three towns had populations of between 2, 000 and 5,000. In other words many more people were familiar with places that Galt knew best and wrote about, like Irvine and Greenock, than Edinburgh or Glasgow. These were the exceptions. What we think of nowadays as provincial Scotland was in Galt's lifetime mainstream Scotland.

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[17] 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, 1540-18*40 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), pp.151-64.

[18] 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.

[19] 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. Sjher (eds), *The Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997); J. J. Carter (ed.), *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2002).

[20] C. McKean, B. Harris and C. A. Whatley (eds), *Dundee: Renaissance to Enlightenment* (Dundee: Dundee UP, 2009).

[21] 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.

However, even ten years ago, whilst there were studies of single towns other than Edinburgh and Glasgow - Aberdeen and Dundee for example - no historian had systematically examined Scotland's smaller towns – their economies, their governance, their social composition, social relations and high and popular culture, social stresses, the impact if any of the Enlightenment, or their physical form - the built environment. In other words Scottish urban history lagged a long way behind our understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of change in Scotland's countryside in what is sometimes termed the long eighteenth century.

The deficiency in our understanding of provincial Scotland began to be addressed in 2009 by a small team of historians led by Bob Harris who now has a chair at Oxford, supported by the late Professor Charles McKean, the architectural historian, and myself, with funds from the AHRC. In this project – entitled 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.

In the time I have here it's impossible to report all of the project findings. Many have appeared in print already, in article and chapter form. Bob Harris, with Charles has written a substantial book, published earlier this year (2014) by Edinburgh University Press – that won, deservedly, the Saltire Society's Book of the Year award.[22]

What this work has revealed is just how accurate and how perceptive was Galt on the nature of improvement and its material and social impact at the turn of the nineteenth century. Despite being dependent in large part on what he knew about or gleaned on Irvine and to a lesser extent Greenock, his fictional parish of Dalmailing and burgh of Gudetown are nowhere specific. But as I failed to see in 1979 (as have others who have sought to find the specific sources of Galt's information), this is Galt's achievement; they are everywhere. Galt in *Annals* and *The Provost* but in his other works of the same period has 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 observed, 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.[23] 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, although the impetus 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 and who backed national improving agencies such as the Board of Trustees for Fisheries and Manufactures, and the Bank of Scotland.[24] 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, and certainly across urban Scotland there emerged a kind of civic urban code of modernisation and a rejection of the 'feudal' past that was identified as the cause of Scotland's 'backwardness'.[25] Tellingly, given our focus on Galt, we have a report from Greenock – Galt's home town – that some time prior to 1800 a William Sibbald, an architect, had

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[22] B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment, 1740-1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014).
[23] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, p.4.
[24] 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).
[25] Harris and McKean, *The 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.

produced a plan for Greenock that was 'similar to that carried out in the New Town of Edinburgh by the same man in conjunction with Robert Reid.'[26] Sibbald was also associated in the 1790s with plans for New Montrose, to be build on the island of South Esk.[27] It's also around the time of the publication of the plans for Edinburgh – the central decades of the eighteenth century – again across Scotland, that 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.[28]

What is striking too was a remarkable degree of self-conscious competition between Scottish towns, and lots of copy-cat behaviour – in terms of say, the design of town houses, or churches, or even the ubiquitous 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. These would serve for the 'ornament and edification of the burgh', but his motivation it seems was that such lamps were to be seen 'in all well regulated cities and towns of any degree'. But Galt goes further than this both by highlighting real world examples of such 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'. 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 Auchenharvie.

Rivalry is conveyed more subtly in some of the dialogue of the characters in *The Gathering of the West*, Galt's account of the expedition of people from the west of Scotland to Edinburgh for the visit of King George IV in 1822. I should preface the example I'm going to quote by explaining that 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 stop householders tipping waste matter from their windows onto the street below, which in turn removed the necessity for pedestrians to walk down the centre of the street. So in Gudetown in *The Provost* Galt devotes a chapter 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 convenienced.' Our sometimes snide and sharp-tongued narrator in *The Gathering of the West* has one of his main characters, Mrs M'Auslan visit one of Greenock's dressmakers, Miss Menie M'Neil. '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….'. 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 him, while what impressed about Edinburgh 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.' By Galt's metaphors are we taken into the mind-set of his

[26] T. W. Hamilton, *How Greenock Grew* (Greenock, 1947), 19.
[27] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.201, 205.
[28] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.7, 104.

age and by inference learn – or to use that good Scottish word, *jalouse* - what for contemporaries was new and important. This even a ladies slipper maker from Perth, Thomas Murie, on a recruiting mission with the Royal Perthshire Militia late in 1799, knew what to look for as he passed through several Lowland towns. Kilmarnock he thought of as 'very irregular built…the streets narrow except at the Cross', whereas by contrast Ayr with its 'regular built' new town and 'very handsome' new bridge, had 'several streets well paved & lighted', with the main street 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, the place that most impressed Murie was Glasgow, capital of the west of Scotland, 'elegantly built upon a regular plan', with wide streets 'paved & lighted on both sides & straight.' [29]

And in this respect what Galt offers in addition to an acutely observed chronicle, is something historians struggle with – and that's contemporary perception. As I've just hinted, historians looking back are usually obliged to speculate about how their subjects read or interpreted an incident or a movement or even their era. What Galt provides us with – uniquely – based on his own first hand knowledge as an observer but also as a participant in the business and associational life of Greenock for example, as a businessman, a parliamentary lobbyist and colonial entrepreneur, are insights into the mental processes of his characters. Through Galt we can get closer to understanding what made provincial Scotland tick.

And Galt's urban Scotland is one where the main driver of growth and improvement was the prospect of gain: commerce.[30] Scotland's towns were above all else, a locus for making money. The key driver was 'the desire to do whatever was necessary to sustain economic progress.'[31] So, for example, when narrows or closes were being widened, and streets straightened, and market crosses moved, 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. That's not to say that elegance and ornamentation didn't matter; as Harris and McKean have indicated, while town reform was geared to the new economic and commercial realities, the agenda for urban change was focussed on 'circulation, amenity and visual aggrandisement.'[32] Enlightenment values and culture incorporated a growing concern for 'ornament', but this was alongside utility and the requirement for order and regularity, that is towns organised along rational lines. Industrious places which were also sociable, humane and urbane.[33]

And the impetus for growth and change and improvement came from private individuals – in *The Provost* represented by the aptly named Baillie McLucre – 'a greedy body' according to our narrator, who had his counterparts in the real world of Scotland's later eighteenth century towns, the entrepreneurial middle classes. It was from private individuals too who provided the vast bulk of the finance for improvement projects. Many town councils in Scotland were, by the early nineteenth century, bankrupt.[34] Partly this was the result of corruption and all kinds of jobbery, but just as much it was the consequence of financial mismanagement and downright incompetence on the part of burgh magistrates and councils. Burgh reform and

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[29] Perth and Kinross Council Archives, MS 14/16/3, Diary of Thomas Murie, pp.6-7, 11-12.

[30] 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.
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[31] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.109, 114.

[32] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, p.104.

[33] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, p.7.

[34] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.123-7.

effective financial management were a key part of the improvement agenda.[35] Burgh indebtedness too was commonplace, often the result of over-ambitious or, more often, ill-planned improvement schemes. Entirely believable despite sounding far-fetched is Provost Pawkie's account of how he increased town revenues for improvement purposes 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. Bridge building was a regular feature of the improvement process, the older medieval structures being too weak or narrow for the increased traffic of the later eighteenth century.

Any substantial funding came not from the public purse, but from the purses of the public.[36] With the more affluent inhabitants of Scotland's towns being averse to stenting – or compulsory tax rises, there were subscriptions for virtually everything, including schemes to relieve the poor or the temporarily distressed as happens in chapter 25 of *The Provost* when a subscription is set up to support the families of the 17 seamen of the town who had perished in a gale.

And in documenting all of this, Galt is even better than anyone who's pointed to Galt's value to the social historian has imagined. Historians' understanding of Scotland's eighteenth century history has deepened immensely over the past half century, and now of course we know so much more about the towns. Rightly we should commend Bob Harris and the late Charles McKean for their achievement, but Galt got there first, two hundred years ago.

Let me turn now what you might be judged to be a series of assertions into a couple of more detailed examples that I hope will reinforce what I'm saying.

The first concerns common land. Prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numerous Scottish burghs had portions of common land, either owned by the burghs or granted for the use of the town by a neighbouring landowner. Such land was used for a variety of purposes – as a source of kindling for their fires, or of peat, somewhere townspeople could acquire turf and stone for building. Common land too was used by burgesses to graze their sheep and cattle, and sometimes too for sports and games and urban ceremonials.[37]

In the eighteenth century town councils became increasingly aware of the commercial value of their holdings, and of the need to generate additional revenue to support their activities. 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 its advantages. So 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, and then letting this out on a 999 year-long tack. Carried out in the name of improvement, and in Pawkie's eyes a demonstrable success, there was of course a counter-reaction. Galt's texts 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.' We now know, from looking at more traditional kinds of historical evidence like council minutes and court records that this was how such measures were viewed, and received, throughout much of urban Scotland - so that in Irvine (significantly, given Galt's associations with the town), Ayr and Hawick there were similar protests of the kind Galt narrates in Gudetown as well as appeals to the Court of Session on just the grounds that Galt

[35] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.126-7.
[36] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, p.131.
[37] Whatley, *Scottish Society*, p.76.

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 wage workers and the burgh's poorer inhabitants.[38]

My second example relates to another aspect of improvement. That is 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 elites and the more affluent inhabitants of towns to withdraw from older, traditional activities and behaviours, such as their involvement in certain sorts of the more rumbustious civic ceremonials that had punctuated the town's annual cycle – like fairs, sports or, most spectacularly, the king's birthday celebrations. Instead, urban elites were expected – and sought to - 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 of the towns Bob, Charles and I looked at had at least one Masonic lodge; many had several.[39] 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 culture percolated through to provincial Scotland. Galt we know 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), bookshops and newspapers were the route-way to radicalism, as the nervous Tory-inclined Galt makes clear – something that yet again that recent historical research has confirmed and which explains why there was a series of steep increases in taxes on newspapers in the 1790s.[40]

And this anxiety about threats to the social order – 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 alter the nature of the monarch's birthday celebrations.

The presumption might be that Galt included a chapter on this subject simply for literary effect and, until the 1990s when today's historians began to look more closely at the king's birthday in Scotland, Galt's account could well be seen in this light. Perhaps even more picaresque is the opening chapter 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 a piece 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'.[41] Yet we know now - following Callum Brown's work on protest in Scotland's pews, that riots directed against unpopular new ministers – notably those who were appointed by landed patrons (in the case of Dalmailing the Laird of Breadlands) against

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[38] Whatley, *Scottish Society*, pp.155,159; see too K. R. Bogle, *Scotland's Common Ridings* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), pp.87-101.
[39] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, pp.190-1, 442-3.
[40] 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.
[41] Bohrer, 'John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*', p.104.

the wishes of the local heritors and elders and parishioners themselves - were the most common form of riot and disorder in rural Scotland in the eighteenth century.[42]

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, but we know now that it was just such a variance from the norm that sparked meal riots; indeed in work I've published elsewhere I've 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 (5 – 6 p in today's money), the price that had been paid for several decades.[43] Thus in 1796 during a period of shortage in Peterhead for example, the volunteers there issued a warning to the magistrates not admit soldiers to the town – as they'd force up the price of meal; their 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 them at the same price, that is one shilling.[44] In fact in every other detail Galt's account in which each word and phrase add meaning, matches what we learn from more traditional and usually much less colourful sources.

Similarly if we look at the steps the town's authorities took to pre-empt such disturbances, we can see how accurate were Galt's descriptions and how rich his writing, a judgement more readily made now that we know so much more about what was going on in urban Scotland at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus in Chapter 34 of *Annals of the Parish*, which covers 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 grain and meal to the better off inhabitants of Dalmailing at inflated prices. But slipped into the text is the remark that, '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.' A minor matter apparently, yet what Galt is alluding to here is 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 controversial was this issue that it went to the Court of Session where in 1801 Lord Meadowbank ruled that this 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, was a threat to the commercial system. Calling on the work of 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'.[45] The paper (see note 41) that drew attention to this enormously significant but largely overlooked legal case and judgement was published in 2012: Galt was onto it long before that.

But what of the king's birthday?

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[42] 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.

[43] '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.

[44] National Records of Scotland, Justiciary Court Records, JC26/287, JC26/297.

[45] Whatley, 'Lord Meadowbank', p.2.

In theory the occasion was one in which the urban community united to demonstrate its loyalty to the reigning monarch, who, for most of Galt's lifetime was King George III, whose birthday was celebrated on 4 June. Yet the formal procession with the great and the good leading the way, would typically include not only the provost and magistrates but also figures like the minister, senior army officers if they were around, supervisors of the customs and excise, lawyers and leading citizens like merchants and physicians. Anyone who was particularly unpopular was therefore in a highly exposed position – out there in public in front of a large crowd of the town's increasingly drunken inhabitants.[46] In provost Pawkie's Gudetown the particular objects of the crowd's wrath were the aptly-named Mr Firlot, a profiteering grain merchant, and Mr Stoup, an overly-zealous and again tellingly-named customs officer, while the general unease that culminated in a riot was the town council's decision to stop the time-honoured distribution of free coals for the bonfire – an act considered, as reported by Pawkie, to be 'a heinous trespass on the liberties and privileges of the people'. But what was happening in Gudetown wasn't exceptional. 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.'[47] Which is more or less what was happening in Gudetown, although there the provost and his associates attempted to walk sedately to the tollbooth.

Galt's selection of a grain merchant and a customs officer is deliberate and astute: across Lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century it men from these two occupations who were most deeply resented and who were most commonly the object of verbal abuse and physical assault – unfairly according to Galt's narrator, who in *Annals* for example, makes clear that he saw nothing wrong with the fact that a merchant-manufacturer such as Mr Cayenne made a profit from his business activities which included job creation and ensuring a decent supply of meal; the hostility Cayenne generated, he put down to prejudice.

But returning to the king's birthday, in Gudetown as elsewhere, not only was the crowd fuelled by copious quantities of free drink, it also had access to what we might call the weapons of the weak – fire, burning barrels, and also the flotsam and jetsam of the street – stones and mud, but also stray animals such as cats and dogs which also had their uses if the need arose. In this way the world was turned upside down, and for a time anyway, disorder – and the people below - reigned supreme.[48]

In capturing all this but also describing the circumstances that had produced the tensions 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 equally closely observed and finely detailed engraving of the king's birthday in Perth in 1819.

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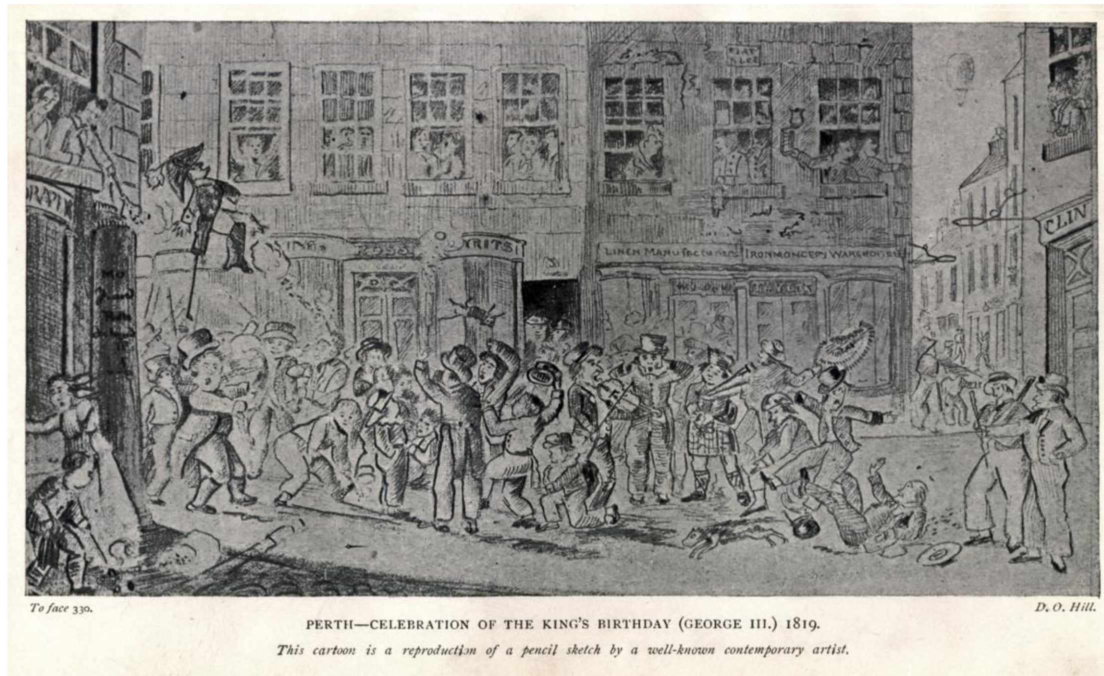
[46] C. A. Whatley, 'Royal Day, People's Day: The Monarch's Birthday in Scotland, *c*.1660-1860', in R. Mason and N. Macdougall (eds), *People and Power in Scotland: Essays in Honour of T C Smout* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992), pp.170-88.
[47] Angus Archives, M1/1/9, 14 June 1786.
[48] C. A. Whatley, '"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.


To face 330. D. O. Hill.
PERTH—CELEBRATION OF THE KING'S BIRTHDAY (GEORGE III.) 1819.
This cartoon is a reproduction of a pencil sketch by a well-known contemporary artist.

Worth noting too in this illustration are other features of Galt's world of Scotland's modernising towns, such as shops, the even frontages of stone-built buildings (uniform lines of these had become 'well nigh universal' by the end of the eighteenth century[49]), regular sash windows, slated roofs, and what appear to be holders for gas lamps – to illuminate dark and treacherous streets. Centre stage is the blot on Provost Pawkie's townscape – disorderly people.

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 evolvement of story', but 'in reflecting realities as nearly and truthfully as possible'.[50] Little wonder then, that Galt's works which record a Scottish past that was recognisable and still remembered, sold well.

Galt's fictional writing though isn't just a closely observed record of his times, invaluable – and brilliantly conveyed - as this is. By applying a series of literary devices, from the choice of names he gives to his characters – 'name types' (which merits a paper on its own)[51], to the way the thoughts of or words spoken by his characters reveal contemporary attitudes, Galt takes us more deeply into his world than is possible for all but the very best historians.

But also deep within his writing is to be found Galt the political activist, a man whose purpose is to guide behaviour, perhaps even a social theorist.[52] Along with Scott and many of his more conservative contemporaries, Galt was alarmed by the activities of Scotland's

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[49] Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, p.115.
[50] 'Biographical Memoir', in J. Galt, *Annals of the Parish and the Ayrshire Legatees* (London: Maclaren & Co., n.d.), pp.xxvi-xxvii.
[51] For a useful if brief discussion of Galt's utilization of type-names by H. B. de Groot, 'Public Benefits and Private Gains: The Provost and The Member', in Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt*, pp.283-7.
[52] R. Hewitt, 'John Galt, Harriet Martineau, and the Role of Social Theorist', in Hewitt (ed.), *John Galt*, pp.345-72.

radicals. His responses to political radicalism are to be found in several of his works, including *Annals* and *The Provost* and *Lawrie Todd*, but also in *The Gathering of the West*. This was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1823, that is not long after the shock that had been induced amongst the authorities in 1820, the year of the so-called Radical War, although as I've argued elsewhere radical-tinged activity continued to erupt in west central Scotland for a further two or three years thereafter. Working class resentment at over the radicals' defeat was acute with bitter, and spilled over into several riots and disturbances in many places including those with which Galt was familiar: Glasgow, Paisley, Port Glasgow and Greenock.[53] Of this I think, Galt was also acutely aware; hence his continued attempts to counter it.

In the *Gathering* which is ostensibly about the King's visit to Edinburgh but which is underlain by concerns about the Radical challenge, Galt uses a variety of devices both overt and subtle to drive home his message. The first is by direct attack, that is by condemning 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.' 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 descriptions too, slipped in almost inadvertently, as when just after his reference to the 'ruddy' inhabitants of Greenock he talks of the 'pale-faced' Paisley weavers. Unhealthy bodies, unhealthy minds?

There is ridicule too – the more effective as it was based on something that had its roots in reality. I'm referring here to what Galt calls the 'patriotic band of weavers' wives, who around 1820 stopped drinking tea and other excisable goods 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.' To abjure tea drinking then is no hardship for Paisley's wild and lawless whisky drinking women.

There is ridicule too in the weavers demands – for the King to come to Paisley and perhaps even to settle in Scotland even if there's a shrewdness in the recognition by some of the weavers that such a visit, even a short one, would be good for trade. Ridiculed too – by the narrator – is what is called 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 – say of Parliament as 'the rotten carcase o' British liberty', the more deluded ideas of the weaver radicals are contrasted with the wiser words of one of their more reasonable brethren, Peter Gauze, again well-named, but who's more neatly dressed which, 'compared with the others' indicated according to the narrator, 'that he 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 vase machinery of the cotton-mills'.

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[53] Whatley, *Scottish Society*, pp.324-7.

And that sagacity is seen in the voice that Galt gives to Peter Gauze, who advises the weavers – but by using language and metaphors Galt's intended audience would readily understand - to abandon their initial plan to go and see the King in Edinburgh as a deputation. This would hardly be likely to draw 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, as members of the community at large. But this wasn't the end of Galt's efforts to undermine Clattering Tam and his ilk. After beating 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 the weavers 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.

In conclusion, there is no more vivid or more humane – by which I mean empathetic – writer on the period about which he writes, which takes me back to where I started: the establishment of this new society, devoted to John Galt is long overdue and enormously welcome.