



# John Galt

1779 - 1839



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**John Galt** was born in Irvine in 1779, the son of a sea captain who traded with the West Indies. In 1789 the family moved to Greenock and much of Galt's fiction draws from the localities of the west coast of Scotland where he spent his youth. He was a sickly child and much of his time was spent listening to the traditional tales of his mother and the local women of Greenock, an influence that feeds into Galt's gift for storytelling and his acute ear for regional dialect.

**John Galt** was possessed of a pragmatic as well as an imaginative turn of mind. He had a keen interest in business and politics and always maintained that he regarded writing as a secondary profession. From 1796 - 1804 Galt worked as a junior justice clerk in Greenock before setting off for London on a sudden impulse of restless ambition. Here he studied political economy and commercial history and practise but failed to really make his mark on the business world despite several promising ventures.

**Around** the age of twenty-four Galt began writing. He experimented in verse but was an inferior poet. Several of his essays, however, were published and his writing at this time demonstrates his early interest in politics and the colonies, particularly Canada which had long captured his imagination.

**In 1809** Galt spent a period of time travelling on the Mediterranean and it was here that he made his acquaintance with Lord Byron who was to become the subject of his acclaimed biography *The Life of Byron* in 1830. In 1811 he returned to London, his commercial aspirations disappointed and turned to journalism as a means of making money. At 34 he married the daughter of his literary patron, Alexander Tilloch. It was at this time too that Galt gained his experience of the workings of Parliament as a lobbyist for the Edinburgh-Glasgow canal. These experiences were to be formative in Galt's later political career in Canada and were also to inform his later political novels, *The Radical* and *The Member*.

**In 1813** Galt conceived the idea of writing a west of Scotland novel based on the observations of a parish minister but he was to wait until the writing of Walter Scott had transformed the climate of Scottish literature before a publisher would accept a book about a Scottish subject. Once published Galt's works flew off the press. *The Ayrshire Legates* were serialised in 1820 - 21. Then came Galt's *The Steamboat* and *Annals of the Parish* in 1821, and *Sir Andrew Wylie, The Gathering of the West, The Provost* and *The Entail* in 1822. In 1823 *Ringan Gilhaize*, was published, followed by two less successful historical novels.

*John Galt  
Memorial Fountain,  
the Esplanade,  
Greenock.*



**Yet** despite critical and commercial success, Galt had not abandoned his business aspirations. In 1824 Galt became actively involved in political campaigning on behalf of the Canadian colony and two years later left for Canada leaving the manuscript for *The Last of the Lairds* with his publisher. During the years 1827-29 Galt developed the virgin territories of the Canadian colony and founded the townships of Guelph and Goderich. For Galt, the Canadian project was the realisation of his most profound ambitions. But he was to fall foul of colonial bureaucracy and was eventually forced to return to Britain in 1829 under charges of debt and placed in prison.

**Once** again Galt resorted to writing for money, contributing short stories to periodicals and penning several long novels. These, however, were not the format in which his talents lay and his final political novels *The Member* and *The Radical* mark a return to form in 1832. In his later years Galt suffered a stroke and composed his *Autobiography* by dictation, with the intention of setting the record straight about his involvement in Canada. He returned to Greenock in 1834 and continued writing up until his death, aged 60, in 1839.



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