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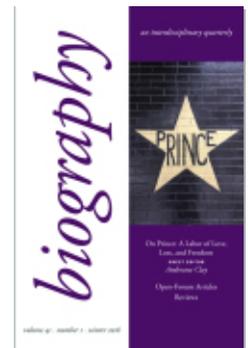
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“MORE NATIONAL (TO IRELAND) THAN PERSONAL”

JAMES PRIOR’S *LIFE OF OLIVER GOLDSMITH* (1837)

NORMA CLARKE

In 1837 James Prior, an Irish-born naval surgeon whose well-received biography of Edmund Burke had appeared in 1824, published a biography of Oliver Goldsmith. Like the *Memoir of the Life and Character of Edmund Burke*, Prior’s *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* was generally well received. Among the praise, however, were a few demurrals, most notably from John Forster in *The Examiner*. Forster criticized Prior for what he considered his pedantic accumulation of detail. Prior, Forster wrote, “wanders away from his subject at every second or third page” (Review 819). When Prior did return to Goldsmith, there were rewards for the reader, and Forster admitted to feeling “sincere gratification” by the time he reached the end of the two stout volumes, but he wished he could have satisfied his interest “without the penalty of stumbling at every other page over Carolan the Irish bard, or Mr Burke and his schoolfellows, or Mr Contarine and all his connections, or Mr Lachlan Maclean, or Dr James Grainger, or Mr Edward Purdon . . . or Doctor Glover, or heaven knows how many Misters and Doctors beside” (Forster, “Literary” 819).

Forster was keenly interested in Goldsmith and some ten years later went on to write his own biography, *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* (1848), drawing on Prior’s research. Forster’s book was easily as long as Prior’s, even if what Forster characterized as “superfluous passages” in Prior had been “unsparingly omitted” (Forster, Review 5). A second edition in 1854 also included a detailed preface and introductory notes defending his work against Prior’s complaints of piracy and asserting its superiority. In Forster’s view, as can be seen from the examples of “Misters and Doctors” who stood in the way of his clear view of Goldsmith, Prior had paid far too much attention to Goldsmith’s Irish connections and associations. He had failed to discriminate between important and unimportant matter. Forster explained that he had seen his task as a biographer to transform “an indiscriminate and

dead collection of details *about* a man" into what he called "a living picture of the man himself surrounded by the life of his time" (Forster, *Life and Times* viii, emphasis in original). The result was universally hailed as a great success. Goldsmith "stands before us in the vividness of reality," said the *Quarterly Review*, praising Forster's "acute and genial comments," by which he had "assigned to the mass of disjointed facts their true significance" (Elwin 206). Forster's comments, the "genial" tone of his writing, were valued for knitting together and giving "true significance" to the particulars of Goldsmith's life. Forster's approach, as Peter Cunningham declared in the *Athenaeum* when welcoming the first edition in 1848, had resulted in "a real biography—on a new, and to our thinking good, principle" (405).

John Forster's biography of Goldsmith became immensely popular. It was reprinted many times throughout the nineteenth century, often in condensed versions, as the 1855 edition's preface states, to "bring it within reach of a larger number of readers" and with lively woodcut illustrations (Forster n.p.). Along with another popularizing biography that drew on Prior's original research, the *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* (1849) by the American Washington Irving, Forster's biography helped shape the public view of Goldsmith and his works. James Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* was never reprinted. Hard to get hold of, it is not much read and is seldom cited except by Goldsmith specialists. It is worth returning to, however, for at least two reasons. Firstly, because the attention paid to Irish writers was an explicit part of Prior's agenda, as it had been in his *Life of Edmund Burke*, whom he introduced as the most distinguished statesman of an age of great men and the greatest genius Ireland had produced. Just as Burke had been "the Irish orator," so for Prior Goldsmith was "the Irish Poet"—though this was not a designation in use in Goldsmith's lifetime, unlike "the Irish orator" for Burke. Prior's biographies tell us something about the place of Ireland in English politics and culture in Prior's own time of research and writing, the 1820s and 1830s, when Irish issues were occupying people's minds, as well as during Goldsmith's lifetime, 1728–1774, when, broadly speaking, they were not. It is illuminating also to look at the objections Prior made when Forster published his biography and the ensuing controversy that led Forster to write his preface and introductory notes to his second edition in 1854, because this conflict, in turn, invites us to think about the place of Ireland in English politics and culture in the 1840s and 1850s. Secondly, the controversy captures an important disagreement in early biographical practice. What the *Athenaeum* called "a new, and to our thinking good, principle" did not seem good to James Prior. He felt that he had been robbed. The principle on which he had pursued his research and written his biography did not include making a gift of his findings to another

writer. Nor did he think his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* was an “indiscriminate and dead collection of details” but a careful, scholarly investigation pursued diligently over many years at considerable personal expense. The materials he had collected were, in his opinion, his property, and their having been published in a book did not make them less so.

In choosing for his subjects the two most prominent Irishmen in English political and cultural life in the eighteenth century, James Prior had a point to make about their contribution and, by implication, about that of the many Irish, like himself, who left Ireland and made their careers in England. The impassioned but dignified terms in which he objected to Forster’s biography—in a long letter to the *Literary Gazette*, he argued that his property had been “transplanted” and “appropriated” and that his pages had been “pillaged” (Letter 375)—carried with them the larger history of colonialism and exploitation that characterized English relations with Ireland, in which the plantation of settlers and appropriation of property by government decree was experienced as pillage. Forster for his part was stung by what he considered an unwarranted attack. The terms in which he responded seem, similarly, to have been drawn from a deep history of colonial rule in which the Irish were stereotyped as violent and uncontrolled, intellectually confused and lacking in manners. Forster, asserting superiority, deplored Prior’s “ill grace,” “vague abuse,” “unprovoked attacks,” and—a word often used about Goldsmith—his “absurdities” (“Goldsmith Controversy” [July 29] 507). He insisted that he had been drawn unwillingly into controversy because Prior had attacked him “on grounds as unjustifiable and in terms as insolent as may be found in even the history of literature” (Forster, *Life and Times* vii). He protested that “no two books so utterly unlike each other were ever before written on the same subject” (xxv).

James Prior’s intentions in his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* were made explicit in his opening remarks. He began by explaining that although Goldsmith was acknowledged as a major writer, no full-length biography had yet appeared in print. In the sixty years since his death there had been “notices,” “recollections,” anecdotes, and reminiscences aplenty, and memoirs were appended to collections of his works, most notably in 1801 by Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore, the English friend Goldsmith had tasked to write his biography and who collected materials over several decades—but none of these were more than “sketchy outlines” of his life. It was an unsatisfactory situation. Goldsmith “stands alone in our literature,” Prior wrote in his preface, “for having produced some of the best Poems, one of the best Novels (in the opinion of all foreigners the very best), many of the best Essays, some of the best plays, and in the estimate of Dr Johnson . . . some of the most useful

Histories." For such an important figure to have been remembered by no more than a "biographical preface" that offered no considered assessment of his genius demanded explanation (viii–x). For Prior, that explanation was to be found in Goldsmith's Irishness.

Ireland, Prior pointed out, had produced many eminent writers: divines, philosophers, statesmen, poets. Little was known of them; few had had their lives written. Prior situated Goldsmith in a genealogy of Irish poets from the Earl of Roscommon through Sir John Denham, George Farquhar, Samuel Boyse, John Cunningham, Thomas Parnell, and Thomas Southerne, and defined them all as writers "of whom we know less than their reputation deserves." Why was this? Had the Irish failed to honor the talent they produced? Were they "lukewarm" (Prior, *Life and Adventures* vii) toward their great men? No, Prior explained, they were not indifferent to the fame that had been earned by high abilities. But for the most part the writers had "transferred their talents to England, and thus lost something of that nationality which would have more particularly identified them with their native country" (vii). Biography, it would appear, was a department of literature that had something to do with national identity, and it needed the stimulus of patriotism. The Irish were not to blame, and the English lacked incentive. Prior's preface invited the reader to think about biography as "an agreeable department of literature" that was both entertaining and useful and implicitly and explicitly nationalistic.

These principles governed the writing of Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*. They are apparent even in Prior's account of the original stimulus: the urgings from a Goldsmith enthusiast, Reverend John Graham of Tamlaghtard, Londonderry. In 1822 Reverend Graham had invited the local gentry of Goldsmith's home counties, Westmeath and Longford, to a public dinner in Ballymahon in hopes of raising a subscription to erect a column in Goldsmith's memory. Few attended. What Prior calls "this patriotic design" did not succeed in raising the necessary funds (xiv). Prior credits Graham with his own design of writing Goldsmith's life, as Graham urged him to do as early as 1827, and he contrasts this acknowledgment with Thomas Percy's failure to do more than write a preface—even that mostly accomplished by his assistants Thomas Campbell, Henry Boyd, and Samuel Rose—Percy himself being "too busy or too indolent" to complete it himself (xii).

Having decided that he would undertake the task, Prior set about visiting locations associated with Goldsmith's life in Ireland. He visited Lissoy, Athlone, and Roscommon and its vicinity. He wrote "hundreds" of letters to relatives and descendants. He searched the records of Trinity College. He read his way through secondary sources and the periodical literature of the time.

It was “toilsome and protracted” labor. Percy and his helpers had turned up very few new facts or documents; there were barely any remains, hardly any letters surviving in Goldsmith’s hand. The archive was thin, but Prior’s efforts in Ireland resulted, he was pleased to report, in “a large accession . . . of information” (xvi). Returning to London in 1831, he continued his investigations. He gathered oral testimonies and resolved to reach out to anybody whose memories of Goldsmith might enrich his text. Prior was at the same time bent on producing a definitive edition of Goldsmith’s works, a challenge since so much of the journalism and the publisher-led projects Goldsmith undertook appeared anonymously (Prior’s edition of Goldsmith’s works was published in 1838 in four volumes). Goldsmith was one of those who had “transferred their talents to England” (vii). He left Ireland in his mid-twenties and had never returned except in imagination and memory. It required someone from his “native country” (vii) to do him justice. Prior’s impulse, like Graham’s, was avowedly patriotic. He regarded the project of recovering everything he could about his subject’s life in Ireland and England as “more national (to Ireland) than personal” (xvi).

The patriotism of the endeavor was underlined by the dedication. Prior dedicated his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* to the Duke of Northumberland, explaining that it had been begun “during your Administration of the Irish government”—in other words, when Northumberland had been Lord Lieutenant, 1829–1830. But there was a further connection that made the dedication even more fitting:

An Earl of Northumberland was the first to offer assistance and patronage to the Poet; and for the amusement of his Countess, the beautiful ballad of the ‘Hermit’ was written. Were I to assign further motives for the present address, they would be the moderation of your character and measures in the Government of his native country during a period of much political disquiet; and the princely munificence extended, where it was so much wanted, towards her public Charities. These are merits which, among her many angry and unhappy contentions, admit of no diversity of opinion; and claim from every native of Ireland that respect which is felt by

My Lord Duke
Your Grace’s most obedient
And very faithful servant
James Prior

The Earl of Northumberland who first offered patronage to Goldsmith had been Lord Lieutenant in 1764 when Goldsmith’s lengthy poem *The Traveller* was published and brought him instant celebrity after seven or eight years of intense and relatively obscure, hard writing in Grub Street. Goldsmith came away from his interview with Northumberland with nothing; some thought

he did not understand what the earl was offering, which seems unlikely. Prior makes the flattering link between the two Lords Lieutenant less to say anything about Goldsmith and more to comment on the "political disquiet" of his own times—the "angry and unhappy contentions" that had dominated Irish political and civil life since the 1798 uprising and the Act of Union that followed. In the flowery language of a dedication, Prior was able to endorse the nineteenth-century Lord Lieutenant's conduct during a year in office that coincided with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, after the Catholic Association mobilized voters into a mass political movement, and made plain the continued alienation of an oppressed peasant and tenant class pressed for tithes and taxes. Even improving landlords were overwhelmed by the challenge of rural poverty, and the habit of harsh government had ensured that "the people," who erupted in sporadic acts of violence, continued—in the words of James Grattan, a liberal thinker—to be regarded as "insufficiently civilized . . . ignorant, prejudiced, vulgar, brutal" (qtd. in Foster 193). The 1830s were a decade of much unrest. Writing his dedication in 1837, Prior was able to look back to Northumberland's "moderation" and "munificence" as merits on which all—Irish, English, governed and governing, Catholic and Protestant—could, apparently, agree. Whether this view was accurate or not, Prior's political reference underlined the larger point: Goldsmith was a writer who should be understood in the context of Ireland's relationship with England.

It would not have been obvious to every reader of Goldsmith that Ireland's "contentions" had anything to do with either Goldsmith's biography or his writings. Goldsmith never wrote about himself as a native of Ireland, and he did not comment explicitly on its troubles. Few in England did so during his lifetime. In the eighteenth century, all the pressure was for incorporation; an integrationist philosophy prevailed and British "liberty" was complacently assumed to include all within its dominions. And although Goldsmith wrote yearningly about the pain of exile in *The Traveller*, which was addressed to his brother Henry, a clergyman in Ireland, the dedication did not mention Ireland, saying only that Henry, "despising fame and fortune" had "retired early to happiness and obscurity" (*The Traveller* 245). Goldsmith the writer was firmly located in London; he was the friend of Samuel Johnson and the author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Praising Goldsmith's novel in 1808 as a work "so well-known," "unequaled in humour," and "universally admired," Edward Mangin (Irish-born but settled in Bath) was not unusual in emphasizing its English setting: "The group of characters, their circumstances, and local situation, are truly *English*, and could only belong to the enviable land within whose confines the scene is laid. In England alone, amongst the nations of

the earth, could such an individual as the vicar be supposed” (60, emphasis in original). Similarly, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, referring to *The Traveller* and Goldsmith's answer to his own question about the best country in which to find happiness, had no doubt that this was England. The poem's final section is described as “an apostrophe to England, in which the author has shewn a warm love for his country”—referring back to Goldsmith's earlier lines, “Such is the patriot's boast, where'er we roam / His first, best country, ever is at home” (qtd. in Mangin 33–34).

In Goldsmith's writings, “home” is generalized rather than particularized, made remote, or frankly disguised. In *The Citizen of the World* essays, when Goldsmith adopted a journalistic persona and observed London as an outsider, he chose to speak not in the voice of an Irishman but as a visitor from China. In *The Deserted Village*, a poem lamenting rural poverty and depopulation, the poet-narrator revisits the Irish haunts of his childhood and speaks nostalgically in the first person of love and loss (“Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain”), but Goldsmith insisted that the poem was rooted in his own recent observations in England. The argument of the poem—that too much “luxury” had emptied out villages and brought the starving homeless to beg on city streets or brave the unknown by crossing the ocean—was so unconvincing to Goldsmith's “best and wisest friends,” including Samuel Johnson, that he felt moved to explain himself in his dedication to Joshua Reynolds, writing defensively, “I have taken all possible pains, in my country excursions, for these four or five years past, to be certain of what I allege” (Goldsmith, *Life* 285). A commonplace response to the poem was that mass emigration was not a problem in “enviable” England, nor was famine. Both were features, however, of eighteenth-century Irish life that stemmed directly from English policy—from laws that strictly limited Ireland's trade. Many Irish commentators understood Goldsmith's tendency to screen his Irishness. They located Goldsmith's “Auburn” variously in and around his native region. In an edition of Goldsmith's writings in 1811, Reverend R. H. Newell discussed the removal of tenants on lands in the diocese of Elphin. He explained *The Deserted Village* in relation to that history and stated flatly that Goldsmith “contrived to give an English character to circumstances and objects plainly and originally Irish” (66).

Michael Griffin, in *Enlightenment in Ruins: The Geographies of Oliver Goldsmith*, succinctly explains the problem: “Though England is the constituency to whom Goldsmith is necessarily appealing, it is not the constituency from which his convictions emerge” (120). Griffin provides an extensive and convincing analysis of the “Irish origins and political geography” of *The Deserted Village*, a poem he describes as “long misunderstood in England” (117),

its "surface Englishness" leading commentators into limited readings (119). Griffin insists that *The Deserted Village* is "clearly haunted by famine and land-lordly oppression" familiar in Ireland in Goldsmith's youth (119). The rural poor in both countries were suffering from the same economic system, but the exploitation was exacerbated in Ireland because of colonial rule. The poem "confuses its Irish background and its ostensible Englishness to critical effect," Griffin writes, "drawing attention to a general rupture in traditional attachments to the land" (120).

James Prior, like Newell and others conscious of Ireland's history and politics, read Goldsmith's writings with an understanding of the "constituency" that had formed him. In doing so they were pulling against a tide on which Goldsmith had seemingly floated in an era when "transferred" talent was subsumed into an assumed Englishness. Prior's determination to write a life of Goldsmith that was "more national (to Ireland) than personal" was grounded in his understanding of Ireland's eighteenth-century history—what he referred to in a later work as the "tyrannical and insulting" policy adopted by England toward her weaker "sister state" and the "undoubted grievances" of that state (Prior, *Malone* 59–60). It was made possible because Prior began his research and wrote his book during a period of relative optimism among intellectuals following the Catholic Emancipation Act. There was a sense that cultural and antiquarian studies could be a binding force, nonsectarian and nonpartisan, "a pursuit," in Jeffrey Baggett's words, "uniting native and settler into a common Irish national awareness" (1).

During Goldsmith's lifetime, and in the high spring-time of the Ascendancy parliament in Dublin in the 1780s ("Grattan's parliament"), hope had prevailed that an integrationist philosophy would bring about better conditions for Ireland. The Act of Union (1800) that did away with the Irish parliament ended those hopes. For some, assuming that Britishness transcended nationality was enough. But ways of imagining a new Ireland had been put into circulation. As Murray Pittock reminds us in *Scottish and Irish Romanticism*, "The 'national tale' was . . . a concept invented in Ireland" in the years immediately following the Act of Union, and its major exponent, Maria Edgeworth, was among those making a claim for a national literature (93). By the 1820s that claim was being heard more loudly. Critics, calling for "national novels," "national tales," "national works," were asking questions about fiction at a time when national political and cultural movements were reviving (Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, and Leerssen 13). For Prior, biography had a role to play in building nationhood. Writers of genius like Burke and Goldsmith who helped dispel ignorance in their own time through their writings also served to help change damaging stereotypes. Retrospectively, their lives

were important in ways they might not themselves have fully understood. By representing the best examples the nation produced, they made a vital contribution to national identity. In this respect, Prior anticipated what became the prevailing view of biography by the mid-nineteenth century. Thomas Carlyle's 1840 lectures *On Heroes* flatly announced that the history of the world "was the Biography of great men"—a dictum that was to be much repeated (13). Prior's tactful observation in his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* that the Irish were not "lukewarm" toward their great men but rather defeated by the circumstances of their departures for England had been expressed more bluntly in his earlier *Life of Edmund Burke*. In that book he complained about the difficulty of finding out about Burke's early life: materials that would have helped him write the biography had not been saved, and the fault lay in "that unhappy neglect which Ireland too often exhibits towards her eminent men" (5; vol. 1).

Among the types of Carlyle's great men were the poet and the man of letters. In Prior's view, Goldsmith "the Irish poet" belonged to Ireland; he was the product of a nation that needed to work harder at remembering its eminent men. Prior's determination to set an example of how to remember them guided his choices, especially in the early chapters on Goldsmith's formation as a poet. Discussing Goldsmith's schooling at Edgeworthstown, Prior suggests that his taste for poetry was formed there and that among the poems familiar in the school, "from a spirit of boyish patriotism," were the works of "their countrymen" Denham, Roscommon, and Parnell. He continues, "From these writers Goldsmith is believed to have first derived his style, general taste, and devotion to what was considered the classical models of the art." Prior reminds the reader that Denham is generally deemed "the founder of descriptive poetry," and he implies not only that Goldsmith's *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village* drew inspiration from him but that the English poetic tradition benefitted (Prior, *Goldsmith* 36; vol. 1). Of another local poet and musician, Turlogh O'Carolan, or Carolan the Irish bard, "so little known in England," whose songs were sung by all classes in Ireland but especially the peasantry, Prior writes in glowing terms. Carolan's music "spoke a general language, and added much to the native stock of which Ireland can boast" (38). He made a point of noting that a Mr. Hardiman of Dublin, "whose industry in the pursuit of works of Irish genius deserves so much praise," had collected 130 compositions by Carolan (38). Prior comments that Goldsmith wrote an essay on Carolan and may have met him. Certainly, Goldsmith's uncle Conarine, who was a student of Gaelic literature and culture, had been among those who valued Carolan and gave him hospitality (Prior, *Goldsmith* 36–39; vol. 1).

Prior maintains his focus on Goldsmith's Irish context throughout his biography. Most striking was the attention he paid to unknown or lesser-known Irish men who were part of Goldsmith's coterie in his early days in London, including Paul Hiffernan, Edward Purdon, and John Pilkington. Among Goldsmith's better-known associates to whom Prior gave space was Hugh Kelly, author of a wildly successful play, *False Delicacy*, which drew an attack from Goldsmith on the superior virtues of his own "laughing" comedy (Goldsmith, "An Essay" 210). Despite how other biographers of Goldsmith might have taken Goldsmith's side in the controversy, Prior wrote sympathetically about Kelly. The key, perhaps, to Prior's strong feeling was his perception that the literary squabbles Goldsmith and Kelly found themselves in were amusing to others. Watching two successful Irishmen fight was entertaining; it was an extension of the "stage Irishman," the stereotypical figure who provided comic relief in a number of plays. When Prior came to describe Goldsmith's funeral he made a point of saying that Hugh Kelly was there, though Goldsmith had not been on speaking terms with him, and that Kelly "shed tears over his grave" (361; vol. 2).

Forster was not alone in criticizing the attention Prior gave to Goldsmith's literary associates. J. G. Lockhart, in a *Quarterly Review* essay extending over fifty-one pages, states that Prior had made poor decisions about content and organization: "His episodic chapters on Goldsmith's literary associates and forgotten antagonists should have been first cut down very considerably—and then thrown into so many articles of an appendix" (275). If the purpose of biography was to provide examples for emulation, there was no reason to pay attention to the unsuccessful. Lockhart's view accorded with the growing commemorative impulse in England, to which Carlyle's *On Heroes* contributed, that saw in biography a version of national monument building. Prior did not disagree but brought a different interpretation of "national" to subjects whom he viewed as "national (to Ireland)."

The moment of cultural optimism in which Prior researched and wrote his book had passed by the time John Forster published *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith*. In Ireland, dissatisfaction with the union crystallized in the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s; along with intensified demands for repeal, there were more outbreaks of violence. And then came the catastrophe of the famine from 1845 to 1849. Starvation and fever following the potato blight killed at least a million people. There was copious press coverage in England and the initial response was sympathetic, but, as government policy hardened under Lord John Russell, the tone in England became irritated and then hostile. The calamity was widely regarded as a consequence of Irish deficiencies. Reverting to stereotypes, Irish misery could be judged

Ireland's fault because the Irish were idle, ignorant, priest-ridden, and ungrateful. Charles Trevelyan, directing relief operations in Whitehall, declared that in his opinion the problem was not the "physical evil of the famine" but "the moral evil of the selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people" (qtd. in McCourt 117). There was a reluctance to talk and write of Irish matters. Only a few years later Harriet Martineau was to observe, "The world is weary of the subject of Ireland" (35). Neil McCaw argues that the sustained and extensive reportage "had a significant effect on the cultural fashioning of national identities and on consequent cultural outputs and tastes" (144). At the very least, he suggests, "an author wishing to portray Ireland had to contend with a defined cultural antipathy towards the Irish, and a pervading apathy amongst the English reading public in relation to Irish-related subject matters" (129). If in fiction the politics of Ireland appeared "in ways that reinforced its status as a subject to be subtly overlooked or else suppressed" (129), we can only assume that the same was true of biography, Forster's *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* being perhaps a case in point.

One of Forster's avowed aims was to give dignity to the part played by literature in society and make a plea for the better treatment of literary men. Himself a working journalist who lived by his pen, Forster was able to see in Goldsmith a progenitor of the heroic man of letters. As such, he lamented the grubbiness, the hunger, the lack of dignity in a Grub Street career in the previous century. The meanness and squalor of Goldsmith's daily existence were all too easily identified with Irishness, since poverty was endemic among the Irish and especially visible in London. For Forster, Goldsmith's virtues of character and talent raised him above his circumstances, be they the accidental "penalties" (Forster, *Life and Times* 107) of an Irish birth or the trials of daily life. Goldsmith's writings promoted the values of kindness, gentleness, and compassion; he was the most lovable of men. Forster's portrait set out to evoke a universal lovable man as well as the famed writer whose works spoke to all above the contentions of politics.

True to his criticism of Prior's approach, Forster mostly overlooked or suppressed Goldsmith's Irish associates, and when he mentioned them it was with a sneer. Carolan features in a single sentence in *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith*, as an example of the kind of teaching at the village school: the schoolteacher was "more apt to teach wild legends of an Irish hovel, or tell of Carolan, the Blind, James Freeny, Rogues and Rapparrees, than to inculcate what are called the Humanities" (*Life and Adventures* 4). In Forster's revised second edition of 1854 this sentence was enlarged by several more that associated Goldsmith's regrettable "wandering unsettled tastes" with "the vagrant life of the blind harper Carolan," a footnote added biographical details

about Carolan and directed readers to Nichols's *Illustrations of the Literary History of the XVIII Century* for "curious anecdotes" (*Life and Times* 11). Laurence Whyte is not mentioned at all. Wherever Ireland or the Irish feature, there is almost always a pejorative expression. Goldsmith's "Grub-street protégés and pensioners" are described dismissively as a "tribe" (163). Introducing John Pilkington as one of the most "assiduous" of Goldsmith's hangers-on, Forster added a parenthesis in 1854: "(when was there ever a good-natured Irishman with five shillings in his pocket, and any lack of Irish hangers-on to share the spoil?)" (163). Paul Hiffernan was "of the Purdon and Pilkington class," an "eccentric, drunken, idle, Irish creature" (158). Summing up Goldsmith's inability to manage his expenditure and "apportion wisely his labour and his leisure" in 1767, Forster made a plea for understanding in terms that initially echo Prior's. Goldsmith's qualities, his genius, Forster writes, cannot be separated from "the Irish soil in which they grew." But his characterization of the "irreversible penalties" that followed from being born Irish were far from anything in Prior: among the Irish, Forster opined, "impulse still reigns predominant over conscience and reflection . . . unthinking benevolence yet passes for considerate goodness, and the gravest duties of life are overborne by social pleasure, or sunk in mad excitement" (107).

Reviewing Forster's *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* in the *Athenaeum*, Peter Cunningham understood that Goldsmith's Irishness was to be discounted. While praising Forster for writing "a real biography—on a new, and to our thinking good principle" and commending his ability to tell a compelling story with the "ease and simplicity of fiction," Cunningham also located Forster's Goldsmith in the tradition of biographies of English "worthies" (405). Biographical collections beginning with Thomas Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) commemorated the nation's most distinguished citizens. The *Biographica Britannica* (1747) sought to collect memorials of eminent countrymen in "a spirit of emulation, which might prompt men to an imitation of their virtues," and make a monument, a temple of honor, for "the worthies of our own time, and the heroes of posterity" (Donaldson 78). Forster, Cunningham wrote, had made available "the known incidents in the life of a really English worthy (or Irish if you will)" (405). The parenthetical "or Irish if you will" was a nod to Goldsmith's known origins, and perhaps an acknowledgment of Prior's earlier work (but if so, distinctly muffled). Goldsmith, in Forster's version, emerged triumphantly as an English "worthy," as English as his presumed-English vicar of Wakefield. To be so judged was matter-of-factly understood to be a form of ennoblement, elevation to the status of a hero of posterity.

Forster's book is a powerful work of biography. George Lewes described it as a labor of love that went far toward raising biography "into something like the position due to it as an Art" (1). Lewes commended Forster's "pictorial" style that gave life to the writing, as opposed to the "wearisome pomp of academic eulogy" that deadened (2). Forster's friend Charles Dickens declared it impossible to give the book too much praise as a picture of the time and portrait of the man. He had been afraid, Dickens wrote, that Forster would champion Goldsmith "somewhat indiscriminately," even in his "very discouraging imprudencies," but this was not so (288). The weaknesses were fully acknowledged. On every page, Forster's "sense, calmness, and moderation" made the reader's love and admiration of Goldsmith grow (288). Best of all was "the admirable manner in which the case of the literary man is stated throughout this book," thus conducing to the dignity and honor of literature (289). It made Dickens proud to be Forster's friend and led him to want Forster to be his own biographer.

On James Prior, Forster's biography had quite other effects. Prior considered *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* to be nothing but "unscrupulous pillage," it was "pillage, from my first page to my last" (Prior, Letter 375). His own work had been "guttled," "transplanted . . . with some dexterity in form, in order to evade the law of copyright," and given a "taking" title, as if there was something new in Goldsmith's life to be revealed when there was "nothing whatever" (375). Forster had no more right to claim original authorship, Prior fulminated, than if he had put his own name to *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and issued it as a new book.

Forster sent Prior a copy of *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith* upon publication. Prior responded by mounting something of a campaign against it. Although his friends advised otherwise, he made it clear that he would go public with his objections. At the very least he managed to delay the review of Forster's work that appeared in the *Literary Gazette*. When it did appear, on May 20, it was more about Prior and the "vexatious literary quarrel" than it was about Forster (Jerdan 342). An editorial note explained that a letter had been received pointing out "the amount of invasion upon a previous work, committed by the compiler" of *The Life and Adventures* (342). The letter recalled in great detail Prior's unremitting labors in pursuit of knowledge about Goldsmith when writing *his* book, his veritable "persecution" of his acquaintances for any information or contacts. These were good-humoredly summarized:

We heard of him at the West-end and in the City; from Hyde Park Corner to Whitechapel; from the Elephant and Castle to Canonbury-house; at the Museum, and in various other libraries; at learned societies and club-houses; he was familiar in various parts of England; travelled over three provinces in Ireland; (we are told) made a hop, skip and jump from Trinity College, Dublin, to the Medical Schools in Edinburgh; was known by notes innumerable and inquiries without cessation. (342)

Prior's defense rested on his industry. His innumerable, incessant inquiries had "rescued from an almost hopeless oblivion" facts that would otherwise have been lost (Prior, Letter 376). Since Forster "did not possess two pages of original information," since the subject had been so "thoroughly sifted" by Prior, Forster's book was merely a copy meant as a substitute for the original (376).

The *Literary Gazette* elaborated on the "reluctance and pain" it felt about the "unpleasant dispute." Under its own column heading, "The Goldsmith Controversy," letters from both men were printed in the summer of 1848. Prior objected at length to Forster's "piracy," his "literary larceny," and compared his action in writing a biography on a subject whose life had been exhaustively covered a mere eleven years earlier to pick-pocketing. The contents of Forster's book that related to Goldsmith, Prior wrote,

are, and have been for eleven years past, that is, since the publication of my life of him, exclusively mine. They are mine in substance as in details: in dates, facts and innumerable personal matters; in the discovery of many of his writings previously unknown; in the ascertainment of several doubtful points; in all the data, in short, which go to form authentic biography, as distinct from what then only existed of him in the form of an imperfect and scanty biographical preface. These were gleaned with great care and assiduity. I hunted for them in England, Ireland, Scotland and several parts of the Continent. London, its libraries, collections and localities, were traversed in their length and breadth, for some years, in the pursuit. They therefore cost me much time, much labour, and were acquired at considerable expense. Several were supplied to me as a matter of personal favour, and *would not have been given to anyone else*. Yet all these you have appropriated to your own purposes, without permission, and with the smallest degree of acknowledgment in a few places; while, in many more, the source is studiously obscured, so as to appear to give the credit of the research or discovery to others. (Letter 375, emphasis in original)

Forster replied with equal vehemence. He insisted that no biographer could claim property and possession in regard to dates and facts, and to do so would be a "serious invasion of the rights of literature" (Prior, "Goldsmith Controversy" [17 June] 407). No matter how intensive the research, ownership of knowledge did not follow; those who came after were not trespassers. Prior

himself had, perforce, to draw on writers who had published on Goldsmith before him. All research discoveries once put into the public domain “became the property of all men” (407).

General opinion and posterity sided with Forster. Prior’s wounded attempt to claim the protection of copyright on the findings of his research fell on deaf ears. His fears that no “honest literary enquirer” would undertake the “long voyage of biographical discovery,” the “circumnavigation” of the age in which the subject lived, that biography as a genre would no longer be worth cultivating “if the industrious are to have the labour, and the pirate the profit,” proved unfounded (Prior, “Goldsmith Controversy” [29 July] 504). Prior’s sense of ownership of his materials and his insistence that the facts he had discovered belonged to him may seem quaint to us now, and his anger out of proportion. Indeed, it also seemed so at the time. Even the *Dublin University Magazine*, which carried a long piece about the controversy in September 1848, offered no support for Prior’s claims of ownership. Nevertheless, there was an issue at stake concerning Irish biography. The writer, Dublin law professor John Anster, claimed to admire both books, but it was Forster he chastised (gently) for his failure to understand the complexities of his subject matter.

Praising Prior for his diligence and great love of the subject, Anster characterized his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* as history, and Forster’s *Life and Adventures* as a romance. Forster’s was a “beautifully-printed volume” that had no footnotes, and it belonged in the problematic category of biographical writings that were “too commonly the work of imagination” (316). Prior’s book had been grounded in original research, but Forster had taken his information from the sources available to him in the narratives about Goldsmith that prefaced editions of his writings. (In Prior’s view, of course, Forster had taken his information from Prior.) The problem with these narratives—the sum total of Goldsmith biography that existed before Prior undertook his task—was plain to Anster: they had been, to a considerable extent, “manufactured” out of Goldsmith’s own “droll stories” (317). Goldsmith had invented stories, “of simplicity or shrewdness,” which had then been “ascribed to himself as hero,” as if they told of events that had happened in his own life rather than being products of his imagination (317). When local people were asked for their memories of Goldsmith, they also told these stories. By repetition they became accepted as truth, but “there is scarcely a single fact of what is called his early life, that is supported by any evidence whatever” (317). Goldsmith’s family did not believe the stories, or rather, they knew them to be stories. To build on such stories was to venture into the world of romance. As Anster stated, “If biography once becomes romance, farewell to any true statement of any incident” (318).

According to Anster, Forster had not understood or had not been able to navigate the difficulties Goldsmith's life posed in its "mingled web of fiction and fact" (317). The call for a distinction between history and romance, while to some extent commonplace, was also a reprimand to the English Forster for not being sufficiently well informed about Ireland. Forster mixed commentary with statement to such an extent that it was almost impossible, Anster explained, to extract passages for quotation without wishing to put Forster right on his assumptions, notably his failure to register the significance of specifically Irish cultural figures such as Carolan, the Irish bard. Since Forster had barely mentioned Carolan, Anster quoted from Goldsmith's essay on Carolan, a passage including a reference to the "bondage" of Ireland under English government. Carolan was important to Goldsmith because he was Irish; Goldsmith could, indeed, be credited with taking the first step in recovering Carolan, itself a fact of importance and one that Prior had recognized. Similarly, Anster argued that the biography of Goldsmith published by Mr. Wills in the "Illustrious Irishmen" series was better informed than Forster's, because Mr. Wills understood how "entirely distinct" (319) was the society of the English from the native Irish. Assumptions made about Goldsmith by English commentators, such as that he was vain and envious, needed to be read through a national lens. Boswell's dislike of Goldsmith was "partly national, neither the Scotch nor Irish being at the time quite well received in English society, and the jealousies of each to the other being in some degree affected by this feeling" (324). While the Scots took care to praise each other, the Irish did not. Boswell's portrayal of Goldsmith in his *Life of Samuel Johnson* as he knew him in London revealed Scotch and English tendencies to regard Goldsmith "as a sort of Irish adventurer" (331).

While not supporting Prior on the grounds of his ownership of the facts he uncovered, the *Dublin University Magazine* clearly endorsed Prior's desire to write about Goldsmith in a way that was "more national (to Ireland) than personal." In its "Illustrious Irishmen" series, it carried long biographical studies in the same spirit. Acutely tuned to the new wave of Irish nationalism in the 1840s, John Anster looked forward to a future in which "the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland" was repealed (329). The implication was clear: with independence, Ireland would regain its "illustrious Irishmen" and know how to write their lives (323).

It is more than a little puzzling that Prior himself did not argue his case on any such grounds. The terms in which he defended his work and objected to Forster's "piracy" contain no reference to the national feeling that had so explicitly prompted the biography. But we shouldn't underestimate the strength of that national feeling and its particularities. Forster had not merely stepped

in and taken possession of property Prior deemed his own; he claimed it in a more profound sense, and one that was all too familiar to those versed in Irish history. Prior's emphatic insistence that the materials he had obtained were supplied to him as a personal favor "and *would not have been given to anyone else*" carried some of that historical meaning. Possession and dispossession, like "pillage" and "transplanted" and "appropriated," had powerful resonance in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. Prior's desire to own his materials was part and parcel of his larger project of national reclamation.

Prior complained that, as a journalist, Forster was able to mobilize support and ensure his book was widely promoted. There had been a "din of trumpets" announcing its publication, from "the ephemeral sheet thrown into an omnibus, up to the more assuming pages of the *Edinburgh Review*" ("Goldsmith Controversy" [29 July] 504). Prior's emphasis on journalistic puffing was a taunt that Forster was by then accustomed to hearing. It meant that he was not "a scholar and a gentleman"; he was "a low scribbler." Prior, a member of the Royal Irish Academy, one of the founders of the Athenaeum Club, and a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries who ten years later would be knighted at St. James's Palace, laid great store on his own credentials. Arguing for possession and property in facts may have seemed to him a more appropriate behavior than arguments that drew on avowed national feelings, especially in the changed circumstances of current public opinion with regard to Ireland. On this we can only speculate.

Certainly, there was little in Forster's biography to remind readers of a sister-kingdom they preferred to forget. His work received huge public approval. But the accusation of plagiarism, and perhaps the somewhat disdainful description of his biography as a romance, bothered him and led Forster to set about amassing carefully referenced notes for the two-volume second edition in 1854, which appeared under a more sober title that suggested "history" over "romance": *The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith*. The woodcut illustrations that decorated many pages in 1848 were removed. (In 1862 the illustrations were restored—at the behest, Forster declared, of Thomas Carlyle.) Forster's long introduction rehearsing the quarrel with Prior and justifying his own position was judged, by Forster's modern biographer James Davies, an effective rebuttal of Prior's charges (83). (Nobody wrote a biography of Prior.) Forster's second edition was reprinted six times in the next twenty years. An abridged version in 1855, considered to be a "popular" edition that was printed without notes and at a reduced price, was frequently reprinted. The version with notes was referred to as the "library" edition. Forster thus managed to be both scholarly and popular by producing separate editions of the same biography.

Prior did not give up his protest. He had also to contend with another popularizing biography: Washington Irving's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*, which appeared in 1849. Irving had already written about Goldsmith twice before. In 1825, working for a publisher in Paris, he produced an essay to preface an edition of Goldsmith's works, apparently taken from the prefatory memoir in "Ballantyne's Novelists Library"—his only source of information; and in 1840, issuing a two-volume edition of Goldsmith's writings for "Harper's Family Library," he expanded the earlier essay with new material taken from Prior's biography. By 1849, Irving had an expensive house to keep up. Spurred by Forster's success, "to please his public and to replenish his purse" (Williams 139; vol. 1), he returned to Goldsmith and quickly produced a full-length biography on his usual principle, "the best biographer will relate facts, but will tint them with sentiment" (Williams 139; vol. 1). There is a lot of tinting in Irving's anecdote-rich life of Goldsmith. Irving, with a romantic view of the past, was light-hearted about mixing "honest and spurious learning" together (115). The sentiment that suffuses his portrait of Goldsmith—"poor Goldsmith" as Williams repeatedly calls him—is tremblingly lachrymose.

Prior denounced Irving in much the same terms that he had denounced Forster. In December 1849 he printed an eight-page pamphlet described in a prefatory note as a letter from "a gentleman of high character in the literary world" (Prior, "A Letter" 1), apparently addressed to another gentleman, a friend of Prior, who has asked for his opinion of Irving's book. In this letter, Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*—"the only full and authentic account of that writer" (1)—is characterized as having been "twice recently pirated, in a manner hitherto unknown to respectable literature, or by any writer of even ordinary repute" (1). Forster features as "the London pirate whom your friend deemed proper to expose in the *Literary Gazette*, June 3rd and July 29th, 1848" (3). Of Irving, meanwhile, since he was an American (with "Old Bailey" origins) (4), nothing other than "literary larceny" was to be expected (3). Irving had nothing new to add about Goldsmith: "all that is authentic he borrows from Mr Prior." Prior had "exhausted the subject." Irving had set out to "build a book at the original writer's expense . . . by seizing violently" upon his property. He was a plunderer, a compiler, "a mere trader upon the capital and ingenuity of another" (3).

It is probable that Prior wrote this pamphlet, and it is listed under his name in the British Library catalogue, but equally plausible that his friends responded to requests for support and composed a letter that could be published as part of his energetic campaign. The text itself evokes a community of likeminded, qualified individuals, all of "high character" (Prior, "A Letter" 1) and sharing Prior's point of view. But the letter offers more than a repetition

of the protests in the *Literary Gazette*. The remarks about Irving broaden into a discussion about why copying from someone else is a bad principle that lowers standards. Irving's prose might be "smooth and pretty," he might be "amiable on paper" (4), but

unable to impart new facts, the compiler depends for attraction, either upon twisting old anecdotes into some form of his own, or upon mawkish sentimentalities, or upon an affectation of pathos, or upon such garnish of romance, as to make the subject of it nearly akin to the hero of a novel,—an imitation of the worst part of Dickens. (5)

This is a "bad mode," because it tilts biography away from history and toward fiction:

the life of an author by profession is utterly at war with any such representation. There is not a particle of romance about it . . . The tone of sentimental fiction is wholly idle and out of place applied to a once living bona fide personage, and that personage an author . . . Were it to be generally tolerated, we should soon have a fearful influx of trash under the name of biography—vapid effusions from shallow or muddled intellects, under which just views, manly sentiments, correct details, enlarged thought, indeed common sense, would run some risk of being smothered. (5–6)

The health of biography depends upon "new facts"; with new facts come "manly sentiments" and "correct details" in an atmosphere that allows both "enlarged thought" and "common sense" to breathe (6). No new facts had been discovered by Forster or Irving, and therefore no new biography could contribute anything worth reading.

In the pamphlet, one model is suggested: Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. But Prior had an earlier model in Goldsmith himself. In the preface to his *Life of Richard Nash*, Goldsmith laid emphasis on his work being "genuine" and not a "romantic history" (288). His *Life of Richard Nash* was a life based on documents; all Nash's papers had been passed to Goldsmith, and the reader would therefore have the satisfaction "of perusing an account that is genuine, and not the work of imagination, as biographical writings too frequently are" (287). Nor was there anything to "inflamm[e]" or excite, but a neutral account drawn from papers, and scarce any "art" involved except that of "arranging the materials in their natural order" (Goldsmith, *Life* 288).

Prior's models were Goldsmith and Johnson; his scholarship rejected "romance" and "imagination"; his faith was in the documents, up to and including Goldsmith's tailor's bills. (Some critics mocked him on this score.) In the late 1850s, he undertook one last biography: his subject the Shakespeare

scholar Edmond Malone, another Irishman working in England. Prior included a long footnote in *The Life of Edmond Malone* concerning his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*. He again recalled his diligence, his "zealous research," and added, "I shall not here allude to the unwarrantable piracies to which all its contents, without exception, have been subjected" (119–20). So far as we can tell, he never budged from this position: the money and labor he had expended in gathering his information about Goldsmith and the completeness of his achievement (evidenced in the failure of others to turn up new material) rendered the contents of the *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* his property.

James Prior became a biographer at a time when biography was considered a subcategory of history, as it had been since antiquity. The biographer's task was to accumulate material and organize it in a scholarly fashion. By the later nineteenth century, biography was regarded as a distinct literary genre. Setting out the facts that could be recovered about a subject's life was only part of the job; the portrait also had to be animated. Forster's empathetic identification with Goldsmith as a working man of letters lent powerful emotional force to his depiction, giving it an almost novelistic life without straying into fiction. Prior's more restrained—but by no means colorless—approach was consigned to the past: he was a pedantic fact-grubber who had failed to move out from under history's shadow. As one review of his *Life of Edmond Malone* put it, he was not a "competent literary craftsman"; he was "a hewer of wood and a drawer of water"; his "unfitness" for "original composition" was "painfully apparent in every line" (Review 404). A faculty for "original composition" had become a requirement in a biographer, and Prior's supposed lack of such talent meant that he should never have written the biography: "repeated failures should have cured him of his propensity" (404).

The Life of Edmond Malone, written in Prior's advanced age and increasing ill health, is something of a cut-and-paste job. But that is not true of Prior's *Life of Edmund Burke* nor his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*. All three scholarly biographies sought to praise "distinguished countrymen" who had made reputations in England. Prior's object was to raise the prestige of Ireland and make amends for its neglect: biographical, in the first instance, but also cultural, political, and economic. In the 1820s and 1830s his ambition reflected a new optimism about Ireland's future. Oliver Goldsmith was in some ways an obvious subject for such a project: he was a respected author, a celebrity, and his biography had not been written. In other ways Goldsmith was a problematic subject: his tendency to screen his Irishness allowed readers to construct him as English. English readers claimed Goldsmith, and the widespread popularity of the biographies by Forster and Irving underwrote that claim.

Between them Forster and Irving buried Prior's book. Along with it they buried the emphasis Prior had laid on the importance of Ireland in the story he told. Goldsmith's afterlife was to be molded along English and American lines. Goldsmith's writings became ever more popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and the fact that readers came to know Goldsmith in the biographies by John Forster and Washington Irving had important implications for how his works were read. "Everybody reads *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *The Deserted Village*," declared William P. Trent in a prefatory note to a reissue of Thomas Macaulay's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* essay on Goldsmith, "and everybody loves their author" (qtd. in Macaulay 67). The author they loved emerged from the "mingled web of fact and fiction" as "a really English worthy."

David Masson, in an 1883 memoir of Goldsmith prefaced to a London edition of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, rather breathtakingly overruled any suggestion that Goldsmith's writing, his "English style," and "English characters" could be considered anything other than "purposely English" (356). While acknowledging that Goldsmith "drew on the recollections of his own life, on the history of his own family, on the characters of his relatives, on whimsical incidents that had happened to him," and that his impulse was "autobiographical," Masson insisted that all of these hung "in an ideal air," that "all special Irish colour" had been "discharged," and that this ideal air was English (355–56). "*The Vicar of Wakefield* is an English prose-idyll; *She Stoops to Conquer* is a comedy of English humour, and Tony Lumpkin is an English country-lout; and, notwithstanding all the accuracy with which Lissoy and its neighbourhood have been identified with the Auburn of the *Deserted Village*, we are in England and not in Ireland while we read that poem" (356).

Among English critics, such cultural appropriation of Goldsmith was not new; but, as I have argued here, it had been given authority by the biographical accounts of Forster, Macaulay, and others. When Prior complained that his research findings had been "appropriated" and that they belonged to him, he was making a claim about interpretation as well as ownership. When he insisted on the facts and inveighed against "vapid effusions" and "romance" it was because key facts—primarily, the facts about Ireland—were being "smothered." In Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*, English readers were politely, quietly, invited to think themselves in Ireland and not in England when they read *The Deserted Village*. Since such an invitation was unlikely to be taken up in the climate of increasing hostility to matters that were "national" to Ireland as demands for "Home Rule" escalated, it is not altogether surprising that Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* became obscure. But Prior himself deserves to be remembered. Without his painstaking work, neither Forster nor Irving

would have been able to write their more popular books. We do not have to agree with Prior about ownership of facts to acknowledge that his work had value and recognize that he was addressing a complex and significant matter when he resolved to write a biography that was "more national (to Ireland) than personal."

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