

## WG on Galsworthy



**John Galsworthy OM (1867-1933)** (above) was an English novelist, playwright, essayist and poet whose notable works include *The Forsyte Saga* and its sequels, *A Modern Comedy* and *End of the Chapter*. In 1932 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The speech transcribed below from Notebook 8 of the RCM, Truro Graham archive was drafted by WG in 1967. It was probably delivered at a Society of Authors Galsworthy Centenary Dinner, though this is unconfirmed.

I remember the occasion very clearly on which I first read John Galsworthy. I was nineteen and at that time living in a house in a remote part of Cornwall – too remote to be within reach of electricity or mains water. My father had recently died, my brother had married, my mother was temporarily visiting [?] him. One evening I sat down to supper by myself and opened the first page of *A Man of Property* [1922; first book of *The Forsyte Saga*] and began to read it – perhaps appropriately – by the light of a rather ornate Aladdin lamp.

Reluctantly at first – with the reluctance, the slight reservation I've had all my life when starting to read a new author or, in particular, a recommended author – I found myself sinking deeper and deeper into the world that John Galsworthy had created – one that I had never known, because I was not a rich, middle-class Londoner; one that I could never know because the world of which he had written was already gone.

This absorption, this complete absorption, which is the greatest joy of reading, and one that comes ever less frequently as one grows older – the last time I remember it happening to me was when I read [\[Lawrence Durrell's\]](#) *Alexandria Quartet* – this absorption in the world Galsworthy had created was for me absolute. I was not concerned at that age perhaps with the deeper [\[illegible\]](#) of character and scene, with Galsworthy's committed purpose in writing a character who so saw property that it included the flesh and blood of someone he loved. Even now I'm sufficient of a heretic to believe that the consuming [\[?\]](#) purpose which first spurs an author to write a book is often ultimately of less final importance than the world and the characters which come into being as a *result* of his purpose, that come into being almost incidentally to give it form and life. Few people today read about Sarah Gamp because she was a vehicle Dickens created to point the scandal of midwifery in poorer homes. They read about and esteem Sarah Gamp. Few people in years to come will read about Soames Forsyte because he was a vehicle created by Galsworthy to ram home the materialistic grasping attitude of the propertied middle class. They read about and esteem Soames Forsyte as a human being of flesh and blood, as a supremely well created character, being in a believable yet created world, solid, three dimensional, made to last. This is something that few authors have been able to achieve with this degree of success.

It has been said that it was strange that Galsworthy, a man with so much charity, had so little faith and hope. And this is true. But it can be said of many other writers too. Great writers. It could be said of Shakespeare.

But the criticism implied in that comment is not that Galsworthy lacked faith and hope; the criticism is that he possessed charity. Charity today, ladies and gentlemen, is a slightly dirty word when applied to a writer. It means very much the same thing as compassion, but compassion put to more active and practical ends. This Galsworthy possessed in a high degree. He felt deeply about the wrongs of the under-dogs. When he wrote about them it was sometimes with less success than when he was writing of people of his own world. But to all his characters he brought this charity,

this compassion and, fundamentally, this liking. Even the man he had created as his arch-enemy, the man who was to stand for all the things he considered wrong in his own world, a man whom a lesser writer would have used as a puppet – to set up and to knock down – even Soames Forsyte he ended by feeling compassion for and incidentally by understanding more deeply than any other character he had created.

Critics say Galsworthy lacked humour in his novels. What about the character of Aunt Em? What about [illegible] who didn't believe in God but went to church twice a year as an insurance policy? What about old Jolyon who always ate his food in such a way as to leave the choicest, tastiest morsel to the last?

What I think Galsworthy did best was hate. Or rather, the only things he hated were abstract things: class favouritism, injustice, greed, selfishness, malice. But the characters in his books who possess these failings, he did not hate – and they are not hateable. He must I'm sure have believed what Spinoza said: "That men may miss happiness and be tormented in many ways yet surely they are excusable."

To feel too much for your characters is a drawback in the modern scene. The law of libel speaks of those injustices you may not heap upon your neighbour. You may not hold him up to hatred, ridicule or contempt. Yet many notable writers of our day have made their reputation by doing just this [to] the people in their books. To diminish, to deprecate, to deride, these are the fashionable virtues.

So Galsworthy is still a little unfashionable – temporarily. Perhaps this year – the centenary of his birth – will mark the end of the pendulum's swing. Once this swing back has truly begun I don't think future changes in his popularity and in his critical esteem will be great. He is too stable a figure to be swayed by every fashionable wind. He will take his place with Trollope as one of the great recorders of the English scene. If his spirit lives on in some agnostic side-corridor of heaven, let it be reassured tonight that his place in English Literature is not ultimately in doubt.

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