

Roscommon County Council Library Services hold a collection of works relating to Oliver Goldsmith. The titles can be viewed on the catalogue link through the Library Services link on www.roscommoncoco.ie

Castlecoote House

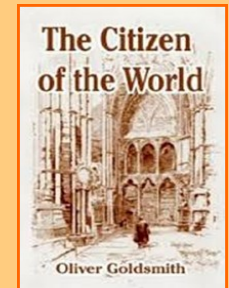
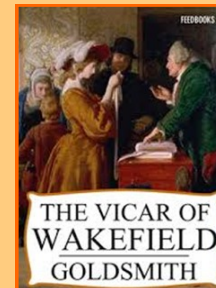
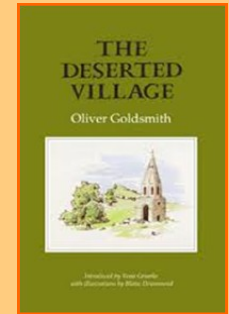
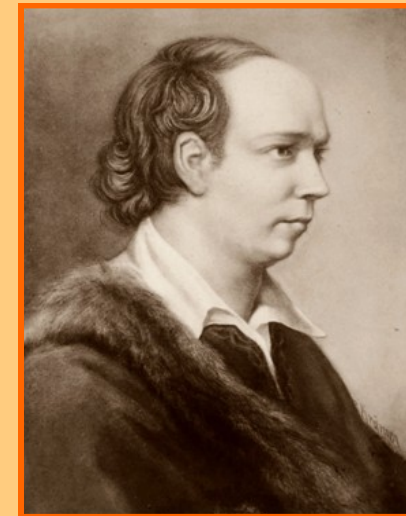
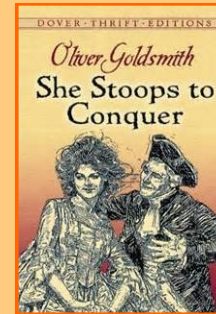
Elizabeth Gunning, of the famous Gunning sisters of Castlecoote House, was a patron of Oliver Goldsmith. A copy of Joshua Reynolds' famous portrait of Goldsmith hangs in the Library at Castlecoote House, County Roscommon (the original is in the National Gallery in Dublin).

Roscommon Anthology and Literary Map

Co-edited by Roscommon-born brothers, Michael and John O'Dea, *The Roscommon Anthology* is a beautifully produced book comprising selected writings by thirty-one writers with close associations to the county. Available online at www.theroscommonanthology.com

Roscommon Literary Heritage Series

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Oliver Goldsmith

Also available in the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series:

Douglas Hyde: *a gifted writer, scholar and first President of Ireland who played a crucial part in the preservation of the Irish language, through his translations of near-forgotten Irish folk tales, poems and songs.*

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John McGahern: *often referred to as 'Ireland's Chekhov', McGahern lived the writer's life, quietly yet determinedly writing novels and short stories of great depth and beauty.*

William Wilde: *a complex man with a brilliant mind, Wilde was an aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, historian, folklorist.*

B. M. Croker: *with fifty published books to her name, Croker is without question one of Ireland's most prolific writers of fiction. During her lifetime, she was a hugely popular author.*

More editions in the series will follow.

Text: Gerry Boland Design and Layout: Jacinta Carlos Ward

Roscommon has a proud history and a rich literary heritage. Its writers and poets have made a significant contribution to the national literature of Ireland. Roscommon County Council welcomes the production of these literary guides in promoting its cultural tourism. This second edition of the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series features three more major literary figures in the county.

There is much that we do not know about Oliver Goldsmith. He kept no journal and left no memoir. Only a few of his letters survived. What is certain is that he was the most naturally gifted writer of his generation. Yet he remains a conundrum. He was a great poet who didn't write many poems, a fine novelist who wrote one novel, and a popular playwright who wrote one successful play. His scholarship was remarkable, especially as it was worn so casually. He was laughed at and ridiculed behind his back (mainly on account of his far from handsome physical features and his thick Irish midlands accent), yet he knew, and was admired by, most of the intellectuals and writers of the day. Desmond Egan, the writer and poet and expert on Goldsmith has written that 'he is and will remain one of the best loved, and least understood, of writers'.

The Writer

Goldsmith's rise to fame was nothing short of spectacular. He began as a hack writer, writing reviews, prefaces to books and translations from French. In 1759, his first major work was published – *An Inquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*. Soon after, he wrote *A History of the War*, and followed it up with *Memoirs of Voltaire*.

In 1762 he published *Letters of a Citizen of the World*. Also known as his 'Chinese Letters', the book did very well. A long poem, *The Traveller*, which he had begun in Switzerland in 1755 and which he returned to in 1763, appeared in 1764. Dedicated it to his brother, the Reverend Henry Goldsmith, it was his first overnight success.

Then came a popular ballad, *The Hermit*, followed soon after by his only novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The novel, set in a rural, and clerical, setting, is clearly autobiographical and is full of personal reminiscences. It didn't sell well initially in England but it travelled and translated extremely well and sold large numbers of copies throughout Europe. The Vicar of the title bears much resemblance to the Pastor of *The Deserted Village*; both of them are certainly influenced by his own father.

Oliver Goldsmith Locations

In Roscommon

(Left) **Smith Hill House**, near Elphin, site of probable birthplace of Oliver Goldsmith.
(Right) **Elphin**, where Goldsmith went to school in the Diocesan School, aka Latin School.



Outside Roscommon

Pallas and Forgney Church (Outside the town of Ballymahon, County Longford, lies Pallas, the site of the Goldsmith family home, and Forgney, the site of the church where Oliver was baptised.)

Ballymahon (Oliver lived here for a short time with his mother after graduating from Trinity College. Ballymahon hosts the annual Goldsmith International Literary Festival.)

Westminster Abbey (Memorial in Poet's Corner)

(Left) **Lissoy Parsonage**, County Westmeath, where Oliver grew up
(Right) Statue of Goldsmith outside front gates of **Trinity College, Dublin**



After three years in Edinburgh, he left, minus a degree, and began his European wanderings 'with a spare shirt, a flute, a guinea, and a light heart'. He spent some time in Leyden in Holland, then moved through Belgium and France (where he is believed to have met Voltaire), to Switzerland and finally to Padua in Italy, where he obtained some sort of medical qualification by means of a public *Disputatio*. He ran out of money in Italy and, deciding to go to London, was left with no choice other than to walk across Europe and get a boat to England.

In London, he worked for a short while as an usher in a boy's school in Peckham, also as an assistant in a chemist's, before accepting an offer to write for a magazine called the Monthly Review. This was his first foray into writing for a living and it was to prove the making of him.

Around this time he met and became friends with the painter, Joshua Reynolds. He also met Edmund Burke and James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, often at the Temple Exchange Coffee House and, later, at The Club in the Turk's Head. These were men of the world who looked down on the small of stature and physically unpleasing Goldsmith, who had no money and who stuck out like a sore thumb in their illustrious group. Yet, he was also very popular, and had a wide circle of friends and supporters.

He had hopes of returning to Ireland, had indeed written about this in

The Deserted Village:

*I still had hopes, my long vexations passed,
Here to return – and die at home at last,*

but on 4th April 1774, following a short illness, he died and was buried in the Temple Burying Ground five days later. It was hoped to bury him in Westminster Abbey, however this proved impossible due to the high costs involved and Goldsmith's considerable debts.



A scene from
'The Vicar
of Wakefield'

In 1768 he wrote the comic play, *The Good Natured Man*, but it wasn't well received. This was the year that his brother Henry, the curate in Kilkenny West, died. Oliver, who was very close to Henry, was deeply affected by the loss of his dear brother and soon after began work on *The Deserted Village*.

In 1769 his *Roman History*, a two-volume opus, appeared and was very successful. In May of the following year, *The Deserted Village* was published to critical and popular acclaim. It ran to five editions in four months. The long poem expresses a nostalgic regret for his childhood in Lissoy in County Westmeath and a genuine love of country life, while also stating a belief that the growth of commerce and wealth is disastrous, as is the policy of land enclosures. The elegiac nature and poetic style of this sublime poem differs markedly from much of his humorous narrative and witty portraiture.

*Sweet Auburn! Parent of the blissful hour,
Thy glades forlorn confess the tyrant's power.
Here, as I take my solitary rounds
Amidst thy tangling walks and ruined grounds,
And, many a year elapsed, return to view
Where once the cottage stood, the hawthorn grew,
Remembrance wakes with all her busy train,
Swells at my breast, and turns the past to pain.
(from The Deserted Village)*

He wrote two biographies in quick succession: *Life of Thomas Parnell* (1770), and another, *Life of Lord Bolingbroke* (1770). The following year saw the publication of *An History of England in a series of Letters from a Nobleman to his Son*, as well as his own abridgement of *Roman History*.

In 1773 he achieved stage success with *She Stoops to Conquer*. This should have alleviated his ongoing financial difficulties, yet he managed to spend everything he earned—and more. The following were published posthumously: *Retaliation*, a witty poem in which he satirised – gently – many of his famous contemporaries; *The History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, *The Haunch of Venison*; and the abridged *History of England*.

A Brief Biography

There are valid claims by our Longford neighbours that Oliver Goldsmith was born in Pallas, County Longford, on 10th November, 1728. There are equally valid claims that he was born in his grandmother's single-storey, thatched house at Smith Hill, just outside Elphin. The Rev. Charles Goldsmith, Oliver's grandfather, lived in Ballyoughter House, on the Strokestown side of Elphin. His daughter, Anne, married the Rev. Oliver Jones Lloyd of Smith Hill in 1718 (the Rev. Jones was at the time Master of the Diocesan School in the village). Shortly after they were married, the couple moved to Pallas. Contemporaneous accounts state that Oliver's mother returned home to the relative comfort of her mother's house to give birth to Oliver.

Oliver grew up at Lissoy parsonage after his father was appointed rector of Kilkenny West in 1730. He attended the local school (where *'The village master taught his little school'*) and was greatly influenced by his teacher and former soldier – and a wonderful raconteur – Thomas Byrne. While in school, he learned to play the flute. An attack of smallpox when he was nine left his face badly marked for life. When he recovered, his parents sent him to the Elphin Diocesan School (also known as the Latin School).

During his time in Elphin, he stayed with his uncle John at Ballyoughter House.

In 1739 he was moved again, this time to the reverend Mr. Campbell's school in Athlone. He completed his school education at Patrick Hughes' school in Edgeworthstown, after which he went to Dublin to study in Trinity College. The family were unable to pay for his tuition, so he was entered as a sizar – a poor scholar who in return for a reduction in fees, performed a series of menial duties such as waiting on his peers and sweeping the courtyards. As a sizar, he was obliged to wear a red cap and a sleeveless gown, the wearing of which singled him out as someone of little or no means. He was not the most diligent of students, yet he managed to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree at the end of his four years.

He thought he might follow his father into a parsonage, and indeed presented himself as a candidate for Holy Orders to the Bishop of Elphin, who lived in the Bishop's Palace. The story goes that the bishop was so startled by the colourful dress of Oliver that he rejected him out of hand. But perhaps the bishop was also aware that Oliver liked gambling and was somewhat wayward in nature and therefore, in the bishop's opinion, unfit for a religious life.

Not much is known about the next year or two, but it is believed that he 'rambled' about the midlands. There are accounts of him spending time in Pallas and Lissoy, Kilmore (near Carrick-on-Shannon) and Oran, Tempe (near Roscommon Town) and Ballymahon. One story goes that he travelled to Cork to get a boat to America but had the fare for the ship spent before it sailed. A family friend suggested medicine as a possible career path and in 1752 he left Ireland and travelled to Edinburgh to study in the medical school there.

