

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Happy Birthday, Tom Jones!

Jerry Kavanagh · Wednesday, February 20th, 2019

Happy birthday, *Tom Jones*! (No, not the ageless and indefatigable Welsh singer.) *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, by Henry Fielding, was first published on February 28, 1749 in London. It's not unusual to consider the novel one of the masterpieces in world literature.

Coleridge believed it to be one of the three most perfect plots (with *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *The Alchemist*). "How charming, how wholesome, Fielding always is," he wrote. "To take him up after [Samuel] Richardson is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves, into an open lawn." Gibbon called *Tom Jones* "that exquisite piece of human manners." Maugham named it among the 10 best novels in the world.

Fielding, a gentleman, a lawyer, and a journalist, also managed a small theater, during which time (1728-37) he wrote mostly forgettable plays (*Love in Several Masques*, *Pasquin*, *Tom Thumb*). He later took up the novel, and as the critic Kenneth Tynan noted, "England, according to George Bernard Shaw, was thereby deprived of its finest playwright between Shakespeare and himself."

In 1741, Fielding wrote *Shamela*, a parody of Richardson's moralizing epistolary work *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (considered to be the first modern British novel). A year later he continued the parody in *Joseph Andrews* (whose title character is intended to be the brother of Pamela), which Fielding labeled a "comic epic poem in prose," satirizing, among other professions, the clergy, doctors, and lawyers. The following year he wrote another novel, *Jonathan Wild*.

In *The English Novel*, Walter Allen, in 1954, wrote, "Yet as fine as *Joseph Andrews* and *Jonathan Wild* are, they scarcely prepare us for so great an achievement as *The History of Tom Jones*, which, after two centuries, remains among the handful of supreme novels."

In his dedication in *Tom Jones* to statesman and former schoolmate George Lyttleton, Fielding wrote, "I have employed all the wit and humour of which I am master in the following history, wherein I have endeavoured to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices." Fielding drew on his experience as a dramatist to impose structure, pacing, fully realized major and minor characters, plot, dramatic conflict, and resolution in his work at a time when the novel was still in its infancy.

Indeed, in *Tom Jones* Fielding created a panorama of British life in the country, on the roads and inns, and in the city as well as an unforgettable good-hearted hero, a British *Candide* of sorts. A foundling cast out into the world, Tom is beset by misfortune and disastrous circumstances caused by assorted nefarious characters and exacerbated by his own indiscretions and intemperance. His

picaresque adventures and his subsequent coming of age are described in 208 highly readable chapters among 18 sections in one of literature's great epic comedies.

The intrinsically sweet nature of Tom is a contrast to the smarmy, hypocritical villainy of Blifil, his half-brother and rival for Sophia Western, the embodiment of beauty and virtue.

In 2003, Jonathan Yardley, in the *Washington Post*, wrote an appreciation of *Tom Jones*, calling it "as fresh as ever." He wrote: "If Fielding is merciless in his exposure of hypocrites, quacks, poseurs, opportunists, social climbers, and schemers, at its heart *Tom Jones* is a romance, a celebration of innocence and virtue."

In 2019, the novel seems no less fresh.

Take smug entitlement. In the chapter titled "The Adventure of a Company of Officers," Tom is mocked for his sincere nature and his lack of formal education:

Northern now winked on Adderley and whispered to him slyly, "Smoke the prig, Adderley, smoke him"; then, turning to Jones, said to him, "I am very glad, sir, you have chosen our regiment to be a volunteer in; for if our parson should at any time take a cup too much, I find you can supply his place. I presume, sir, you have been at the University; may I crave the favor to know what college?"

"Sir," answered Jones, "so far from having been at the University, I have even had the advantage of yourself, for I was never at school."

"I presumed," cries the ensign, "only upon the information of your great learning——"

"Oh, sir," answered Jones, "it is as possible for a man to know something without having been to school as it is to have been at school and to know nothing."

Take the hypocrisy of those in authority. Do you recognize anyone in Fielding's description of the prejudiced, profane, irascible, sport-loving Squire Western?

A country booby [who] had not the least command over any of his passions; and that which had at any time the ascendancy in his mind, hurried him to the wildest excesses.

Squire Western is a harmless fool who dotes on his daughter:

Sophia never had a single dispute with her father, till this unlucky affair with Blifil, on any account, except in defence of her mother, whom she had loved most tenderly, though she had lost her in the seventh year of her age. The squire, to whom the poor woman had been a faithful upper-servant all the time of their marriage, had returned that behaviour by making what the world calls a good husband. Her very seldom swore at her (perhaps not above once a week) and never beat her: she had not the least occasion for jealousy...for she was never interrupted by her husband, who was engaged all the morning in his field exercises, and all the evening with bottle companions.

Does the sanctimonious Blifil, who hides his hypocrisy and self-centered hopes beneath a cloak of seeming piety and virtue, remind you of anyone in Washington today?

What about the smug tutors Square (the "Philosopher") and Thwackum (the "Divine"), who

espouse different but equal types of moral and religious philosophies? Fielding wrote: “Square held human nature to be the perfection of all virtue, and that vice was a deviation from our nature in the same manner as deformity of the body is. Thwackum, on the contrary, maintained that the human mind, since the Fall was nothing but a sink of iniquity, till purified and redeemed by grace.” They spend more time arguing about theoretic abstracts than in practicing morality.

Fielding offers an apology for the two men:

I would rather have buried the sentiments of these two persons in eternal oblivion than have done any injury to either of these two glorious causes.... A treacherous friend is the most dangerous enemy, and I will say boldly that both religion and virtue have received more real discredit from hypocrites than the wittiest profligates or infidels could ever cast upon them; nay, farther, as these two in their purity are rightly called the bands of civil society and are indeed the greatest blessings, so when poisoned and corrupted with fraud, pretence, and affectation, they have become the worst of civil curses and have enabled men to perpetrate the most cruel mischiefs of their own species.

For those of us distracted and sickened by the daily foibles, treachery, and hypocrisy of our own government leaders, we can find some respite in the prescription offered by Fielding in *Tom Jones*: “to laugh mankind out of their favourite follies and vices.”

Above: A still from Tony Richardson’s classic film adaptation starring Albert Finney as Tom Jones.

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