

# Escape from Grub Street

by Russell Kirk

Henry Fielding: A Life

by Martin C. Battestin with

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738 pp., \$45.00

Walter Scott, in 1820, wrote that Fielding is "father of the English Novel." Yet James Russell Lowell, in 1881, remarked to an English audience that "We really know almost as little of Fielding's life as of Shakespeare's." Lives of Fielding, or important essays about him, have been written by distinguished men of letters—Arthur Murphy, Walter Scott, James Russell Lowell, Austin Dobson, Leslie Stephen, Wilbur Cross, and others—but no thorough biography had existed before this big new book came from the press.

Professor Battestin and his wife have discovered a good many Fielding letters previously unknown, 41 political satires previously unattributed to him, and abundant materials in the Old Bailey Sessions Papers and various London archives. We still do not know everything about Fielding; but it seems probable that this Battestin *Life*, so carefully prepared, will remain the principal study of one of the most lively writers in the English language. Battestin published 15 years ago *The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art*, a major study; he is the undisputed chief authority on Fielding's writings and his life.

It will not do to judge this book by the publicity hand-out sent to reviewers and booksellers by the publisher. This blurb instructs us that *Tom Jones* "shocked the delicate minded members of English society when it was first published in 1749. In fact many believed that the book, with its lusty hero, was responsible for the two earthquakes which rocked London shortly after its publication." This is rubbish. There were no London earthquakes (!); and as for shocking the English public at the middle of the 18th century, a sentence from Lowell will suffice here: "We must guard against falling into the anachronism of forgetting the coarseness of the age into which he [Fielding] was born, and whose atmos-

phere he breathed." Fielding and Smollett shocked nobody much.

Worse follows. The writer for Routledge's "book news" endeavors to make much of alleged possible incest. "There is also evidence to hint at possible unorthodox behavior with his sister Sarah, who in fact moved in with Fielding after the death of his first wife." How shocking, that a sister (also a novelist, incidentally) should keep house for her brother! Actually, Battestin touches only briefly on such conjectures, although he appears to have been tempted to turn psycho-biographer at two or three other points.

For antidote to such nasty speculations, one may turn to the pages of Sir Leslie Stephen, in 1899:

Fielding's critics and biographers have dwelt far too exclusively upon the uglier side of his Bohemian life. They have presented him as yielding to all the temptations which can mislead keen powers of enjoyment, when the purse is one day at the lowest ebb, and the next overflowing with the profits of some lucky hit at the theatre. . . . But it is essential to remember that the history of the Fielding of later years, of the Fielding to whom we owe the novels, is the record of a manful and persistent struggle to escape from the mire of Grub Street. . . . He was manly to the last, not in the sense in which man means animal; but with the manliness of one who struggles bravely to redeem early errors, and who knows the value of independence, purity, and domestic affection.

And it is thus, indeed, that Battestin perceives Fielding. This new life gives the quietus to diverse silly anecdotes and legends about Fielding—among them Horace Walpole's picturesque but malicious report that when justice of the peace for Westminster and Middlesex, Fielding was found dining at his house with "a blind man, a whore, and three Irishmen." In truth, the blind man was Sir John Fielding, Henry Fielding's half-brother and his successor as "court justice" in Westminster; and the alleged "whore" was the second Mrs. Henry

Fielding.

Part IV of this book, "Magistrate and reformer," I find particularly interesting. Fielding's campaign against robbers and thieves, which effort brought about the final ruin of his health, may remind readers of the streets of New York, Washington, or Detroit nowadays. Fielding succeeded in catching "a gang of twenty armed pickpockets," all of them Irish and all discharged sailors, who called themselves "The Royal Family"; and also in convicting "Terrible Nick" or "Nick the King of Glory" and his band.

The publisher's blurb calls Fielding a "public defender"—as if he had headed some 18th-century Legal Aid bureau. In truth, his vigorous putting down of riotous mobs became highly unpopular. Battestin makes this clear:

The century in which he lived was moving toward revolutions in both the Old and New Worlds that ushered in republican and democratic forms of government; but Fielding, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, distrusted such systems. He scorned 'the Mob'—'the fourth Estate,' as he called them sarcastically. He would have regarded those epoch-making events with horror, as cataclysms very like the triumph of Anarchy that Pope envisaged in the Dunciad. . . . Far from being the forward-looking prophet of libertarianism he sometimes is said to be, Fielding was profoundly conservative as a social thinker.

*Tom Jones*, said Edward Gibbon, "will outlast the palace of the Escorial, and the imperial eagle of the house of Austria." The Escorial was not tumbledown, when last I saw it, and the great family of Habsburg is vigorous still, though dethroned. Moreover, this reviewer adheres more to the Scott school of the novel than to the Fielding school. Nevertheless, *Tom Jones* will not fall into the obscurity that long ago overtook Fielding's plays; nor will Fielding the man be forgotten, rant though Deconstructionists may.

Russell Kirk writes from Mecosta, Michigan.

## Letter From Cincinnati

by Janet Scott Barlow

### Stranger in Paradise



When I moved to Cincinnati from Chicago in 1973, I found I could gauge the personality of my new city by listing the things I missed about the home I'd left. I missed the bulging Chicago newspapers. I missed being in a place where cynicism competes with humor as the prevailing public attitude and humor often wins. I missed the Cubs. I missed the presence of an irrepressibly vocal populace. (Spend ten minutes with a Chicago South Sider and you'll learn everything from his views on the state of the world to his mother's maiden name, and he'll throw in a recommendation on where to get a brake job on your car.) I missed politics as a contact sport and Mike Royko's big mouth. I missed Democrats.

I went along like that for about a year and a half, keeping my little list and indulging my grief, until it finally occurred to me that there's more than one version of paradise. I realized that political boredom can grow on you, especially when it's accompanied by civic order. I realized that one of the reasons my morning paper seemed skimpy was that it didn't contain endless stories of horrific crimes from the day before. I discovered that it's acceptable, even enjoyable, to root for a baseball team that can actually win, and rather soothing to reside in a town where the day's biggest news might be "Reds Sweep Road Trip." I found it could be relaxing not to *always* hear *everybody's* opinion about *everything*. I never stopped missing living in the same city with Mike Royko, bless his angry, funny heart, but I had one consolation: I no longer lived in the same city with Bob Greene. As for Democrats, I stopped missing them when I pretty much stopped being one.

Today, the biggest difference between me, the rooted transplant, and native Cincinnatians is that natives get

openly—if politely—defensive when the city is criticized, while I tend toward covert defensiveness. When New York acquaintances come to town on business (and a lot of business is done here) and say to me, sometimes good-humoredly, sometimes not, "What do you people *do* around here after 11 p.m.?" I tell them that we just try to avoid stepping in cowplop and getting overly excited at the bingo games—and hey, how about that Reds road trip?

But born-and-bred Cincinnatians are not given to leg-pulling, mixing it up, or playing tit for tat. When big-city Easterners complain that there is no place here to get a seven-course meal at 3 a.m., Cincinnatians don't say, "So what?" or "Who the hell wants to eat at 3 a.m.?" or "Right you are; so the next time you come to town, pack a snack." What they say is, "That's true, but . . ." Then they go on to mention the beloved Reds and the splendid Bengals (See? We're in the big time), the city ballet, the symphony, and the museums (See? We've got culture), the general quality of life, the *niceness* of living here. You want more? We've got a five-star French restaurant (it closes at eleven—sorry) and a *great* zoo.

So Cincinnatians are defensive, yes, but they're also earnest. The city is so earnest, in fact, that if it finds itself misunderstood too often or consistently, the whole place breaks out in mental hives, a kind of collective psychological rash.

*Defensive and earnest.* That's the phrase that ran through my mind during the course of our latest controversy, the one centering on the now beyond famous Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit. Our last municipal disturbance involved, you'll recall, Pete Rose and his banishment from baseball. Cincy took its lumps for its response to the Rose episode, deservedly in my opinion (too much defensiveness, not enough earnestness), and took its lumps again for community reaction to the Mapplethorpe show. But this time it was a bum rap. As briefly as possible, here is the program

of events. The sequence is important.

1) Amidst a nationwide debate over either "obscene" art or obscene "art," depending on who was doing the talking (I came to think of it as the war of the quotation marks), Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) makes plans to exhibit the Mapplethorpe retrospective.

2) Citizens for Community Values, a group whose members include local business executives, religious leaders, and various Cincinnati Bengals, objects to the exhibit's inclusion of seven photographs that are described by the arts group as "Mapplethorpe's most challenging works" and by the community values group as examples of obscenity. In the background, law enforcement officials, citing local obscenity statutes, begin making threatening noises.

3) The national media pick up on the controversy and cast the story more or less as "Hick Town Has Fit Over Art Pix."

4) The conflict, which has become an issue, now stimulates a public debate on the questions of censorship and free expression, the definitions of art and pornography, the purpose and limits of community standards. Through the vehicle of their local newspapers' op-ed pages, countless Cincinnatians participate in the debate by organizing their thoughts, expressing them coherently, and signing their names. The debate takes this form: it is genuinely searching; it is marked throughout, with few exceptions, by civility, sincerity, and restraint; it is undergirded by the assumption that decent people can disagree and is therefore almost completely free of the suggestion by either side that those on the opposing side are, by virtue of their opinions, immoral, unpatriotic, subversive, or evil.

5) The exhibit opens, whereupon city and county officials treat Cincinnatians to the unsettling sight of uniformed policemen clearing out and closing down (for an hour) a crowded art gallery. Immediately, the CAC and its director are indicted on misdemeanor or obscenity charges by a Hamilton