

Historyeye

Captain Robert Jephson of Blackrock, Dublin *“The Mortal Momus”*



In the centre of Blackrock Village, a small, unassuming coat of arms cut into the wall over a flower shop recalls the area's association with an eccentric figure who achieved much literary fame in the Eighteenth Century. Although considered obscure today, Robert Jephson (1736-1803) once enjoyed success and popularity in the theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden and was very much a household name.

Like his contemporary , Oliver Goldsmith, he was the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman - in this case the archdeacon of Cloyne, John Jephson. He was educated at Molesworth Street School, Dublin, under the tutorship of Dr Roger Ford. There was great emphasis on the performing arts at this academy and private plays were performed under actor, Charles Macklin.¹ Jephson was an intimate friend from schooldays of Shakespearian scholar, Edmund Malone, who mentions him constantly in his memoirs. He also features prominently in the correspondence of Horace Walpole. Jephson's family was a military one. Though completely unmilitary himself , Robert pursued a career in the army, ending up as Captain of the 73rd Regiment of Infantry. He retired on half pay in 1763 when the regiment was being wound down, and set about pursuing his real passion - the stage.

Much of Jephson's life and career depended on the greasy art of pulling strings. At first he lived with politician and writer , later Chief Secretary for Ireland , William Gerard Hamilton, at his Hampton Court residence from 1763 until 1767. In 1767 he married a daughter (name unknown) of physician Sir Edward Barry, and shortly afterwards he became Master of the Horse in Ireland under the viceroy, Lord Townshend, his supporter and patron. Contemporary accounts suggest that this position was sought for him by his many literary London friends so that he might be removed from under their feet at the theatre.

¹ John T. Gilbert, *History of the City of Dublin*, page 262. Volume 3, 1861.

*My Lord , here's a young spark so plagues us behind the scenes, night after night, always troublesome - I wish you would take him with you over to Ireland or anywhere out of our way.*²

He never returned to London. Although Master of the Horse was usually a temporary position, it is believed that he remained in that job through twelve successive viceregal administrations by the influential lobbying of William Hamilton on his behalf.

Enchanting and exasperating by turns, Robert Jephson had a talent for making and losing friends. These friends at one time included David Garrick, Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith. Burke inadvertently secured Jephson a lucrative pension when he turned down the sum of £300 offered by his one-time employer, William Gerard Hamilton. (Burke had been Hamilton's private secretary for three years.) Jephson was never too proud to look a gift horse in the mouth and the £300 was snapped up by the would-be dramatist instead. Jephson was apt to fall out with many people for his blatant tendency to touch people for money , for his habit of not keeping appointments, but above all for his taste for mockery. This talent earned him the nickname the "*mortal momus*"³.

Later he entered politics and became a member of parliament for Johnstown, Old Leighlin, again through patronage (this time that of Lord Lieutenant, Lord Harcourt). Although his political career was uneventful and undistinguished, he spoke in favour of the relaxation of the Penal Laws in 1774. This may have been motivated by his friendship with David Garrick whose wife, the Viennese dancer Eva Marie Veigel, was a Catholic. In a letter to Garrick, penned from Dublin Castle in 1774, he said :

*If Mrs Garrick continues as good a Catholic as usual, I flatter myself she will be pleased with an attempt to rescue thousands of the same persuasion from the absurd severity of laws which equally impoverish them, and their oppressors.*⁴

Jephson was virtual poet laureate at the Vice Regal Lodge, where he was a welcome guest. This was a paid position. But according to Lord Cloncurry , whose father knew Jephson well, he lost it spectacularly when he was caught in a mirror making an offensive impersonation of the lord lieutenant of the time, the Marquis of Buckingham, John Hobart, during dinner at Cloncurry's house. ⁵ The writer's invitations to the Phoenix Park dried up for the remainder of Buckingham's four year tenure.

Jephson wrote several dramatic tragedies that enjoyed some success in London in the late Eighteenth Century. His best known works were *The Duke of Braganza*, (1775) and *The Count of Narbonne* (1781), the latter based on Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* .*The Count* was

² *Recollections of John O'Keefe* II, 83. (Philadelphia, 1827).

³ Charles A. Read, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*. Vol. II, page 69. Dublin.1876.
Momus - the god of mockery expelled from heaven for ridiculing the gods.

⁴ Various. *University Of Nebraska Studies In Language, Literature And Criticism*. Thompson Press 2007, page 22.
(From Private Correspondence of David Garrick, II, 276)

⁵ J Mc Glashan, *Personal recollections of the life and times: with extracts from the correspondence of Valentine Lord Cloncurry*. 1849. Page 256.

particularly successful and because of this Jephson played a part in steering theatrical taste away from its pre-occupation with comedy.

He also wrote satirical pieces entitled *The Bachelor* under his pen name Jeffry Wagstaffe, for Dublin's *Mercury Newspaper*, a newspaper with a largely Catholic readership published by James Hoey. From its pages he took aim at Charles Lucas and other members of the "puritan committee" who made up the editorial staff at the *Freeman's Journal*.⁶ Not surprisingly Jephson was a blind defender of the administration of his patron, Lord Townshend, because he was completely beholden to him. He perpetrated a literary hoax on the administration's harshest critic - George Faulkner, publisher of Dublin's *Journal* - in "An Epistle to Gorges Edmond Howard, Esq.; with Notes, Explanatory, Critical, and Historical. By George Faulkner, Esq., an alderman." The send-up was a great literary hit, so much so that it went through nine editions.



Robert Jephson

Always with a flare for dramatic performance himself, Jephson took on such weighty roles as Macbeth at Luke Gardiner's private theatre in the Phoenix Park. His literary reputation suffered in the 19th Century however, and one critic of the time said of him - "*whatever was little seemed great and whatever was great seemed little*".⁷

According to Lord Cloncurry, Jephson lived in Blackrock Dublin, at a house almost opposite *Maretime House*. *The Treble Almanack & Dublin Directory of 1783* lists his address as Newtown Castle Byrne, which is approximately where Seapoint Manor is located today. As its name suggests, this was once the property of the Byrne family who were prominent in the area in the Seventeenth Century and were associated with Cabinteely House in particular.

Jephson died of paralysis aged 67 in 1803, some reports say at Dublin Castle⁸, others at his residence. The house on Main Street Blackrock where the Jephson arms are located today is known locally as Byrne's "Dower House". These arms are one of the few pieces of family heraldry remaining in the Blackrock area and are solid proof of the link between the Jephson family and the property in question.

The Jephson family's association with Ireland can be traced back to the Tudor era when it is believed a Major General Sir John Jephson, MP for Froyle, Co. Hants., married Elizabeth

⁶ John T. Gilbert, *History of the City of Dublin*, page 26. Volume 2, 1861.

⁷ Remark Attributed to Thomas B. Macauley in his review of the Letters of Horace Walpole in 1833. *Edinburgh Review*.

⁸ *The Scots Magazine; Or, General Repository of Literature, History ...*, Volume 65. Page 364.

Norreys, daughter of the Lord President of Munster and so acquired an estate at Mallow, Co. Cork.⁹ The family coat of arms are interesting, even if they look a little like an ad for *Kellog's Cornflakes*. In the Tudor period their arms were already established and featured three lions' heads as their main charge. But during the Cromwellian period, the regal lions were conveniently replaced by the less regal cocks' heads when the family adopted the arms of the Jesson family instead.¹⁰ In the long run these turned out to be a more fitting coat of arms for the ultimate 18th Century coxcomb.

Jephson Coat of Arms:

Az a fesse embattled or between three cocks heads ar wattled ppr.

Crest: a cubit arm vested paly ar and az, cuffed of the second, surmounted on a bend gu, in the hand a pansy or heartscase ppr

There is no motto in evidence on the Blackrock coat of arms but if there was it would say *veritas magna est*.

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⁹ Sir Bernard Burke, *The General Armory*, page 540-1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* page 541.