

## HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



### GEORGE FARQUHAR (c1677 – 1707)

The precise place and date of George Farquhar's birth is unclear, though he is known to have been one of seven children of a Church of Ireland clergyman from the Londonderry area. He attended the Free School in Derry and in 1694 was enrolled as a sizar in Trinity College, Dublin. Nothing is known about his whereabouts at the time of the siege (1689), but legend has it that he was present at the battle of the Boyne the following year (though this is unlikely as he was no more than thirteen years old at the time.

The first of many mishaps in his short life occurred in 1696. He had thrown up his sizarship to become an actor in Dublin's Smock Alley, and in Dryden's play *The Indian Emperor* had the misfortune to run through a fellow actor, having forgotten to exchange his sword for a foil. That put an end to his stage career; he left for London, presumably with his first play, *Love and a Bottle*, in his luggage.

As a writer he had success from the start, though his improvidence meant that he was usually in debt. *Love and a Bottle* was followed by *The Constant Couple*, *Sir Harry Wildair*, *The Inconstant* and *The Twin Rivals* - all characterized by what Thackeray was later to call "a grand drunken diabolical fire."

In 1703 he married a widow ten years older than himself who had reputedly tricked him into matrimony by pretending to be an heiress. He apparently did not hold that against her, but then he was a serial womanizer himself.

In his mid-twenties Farquhar received a commission in the regiment of the Earl of Orrery and for three years was mainly engaged in recruiting, an experience he put to good use in the first of his two classic comedies, *The Recruiting Officer*. Unfortunately the play's success did not cure his financial embarrassment; he had to sell his commission to pay his debts.

By 1706 he was in low water, penniless and ill with tuberculosis into the bargain. His friend, the actor Robert Wilks (who had originally accompanied him from Dublin), paid his bills and urged him to write another comedy, which turned out to be his masterpiece, *The Beaux' Stratagem*. This was premiered, with great success, on 8th March 1707. Six weeks later, on 29th April, Farquhar was dead. Interestingly, in the play he solves the dilemma of the incompatibility of Squire Sullen and his wife at a stroke: by allowing them to divorce - in spite of the fact that at the time every divorce required the passing of an Act of Parliament.

**Patrick Devlin**