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Biography

Laurence Sterne: A Life
Ian Campbell Ross
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"I wrote not to be fed, but to be famous," declared Sterne, and in bursting onto the London literary scene in
1760, with the publication of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* ("an Anglican vicar's bawdy novel"), he won a reputation that has never faded. With its many digressions and idiosyncrasies, *Tristram Shandy* is a complicated book; its author was a hardly less complicated man. Locked into a rural parish in remote Yorkshire he found some reward in light adultery and looked for more in a social life constrained by his genteel poverty. London's literati and glitterati seized upon book and author, and overnight, Sterne was buried in invitations from the cream of London society. Lionized, Sterne became a lion, proud of the mid-life success that he celebrated with excessive expenditures which reduced him, already in failing health, to poverty before his death eight years later at 52. By then he had penned another seven parts of *Tristram Shandy* and, concurrently, *A Sentimental Journey*, an exuberant record of his French and Italian travels.

The biographer (who teaches at Trinity College, Dublin) combines documentary evidence with forceful interpretation to demonstrate the extent to which Sterne incorporated Yorkshire's clerical and lay society into *Tristram Shandy* and how he consciously remade himself thanks to the London society into which his book propelled him. In Sterne social ambition was an unbroken sinew; neither his minor political nor his more substantive clerical writing was divorced from place-seeking and social opportunism. Ross provides interesting insights into the increasingly flexible boundary between the acceptable and indecent in literature and between the covert and overt in self-promotion and marketing, educating the reader in how late eighteenth-century society—a time of fast-changing values—operated its complex challenges-and-rewards system.

Ross's broad-ranging survey of the biographical and critical literature on Sterne is truly

valuable. Though brief, his citation of comments made by authors ranging from Byron to Borges and from Nietzsche to Joyce on *Tristram Shandy* confirms its powerful shaping force on subsequent fiction. Readers will gladly thank Ian Ross for this truly engaging biography; it will lead to their richer re-reading of Sterne's work. James Boswell termed it "A Damn'd clever Book"; Ross's well-presented insights into its maker and its making render its cleverness even more rewarding.