

**Biography**  
by Diego Sorba**INTRODUCTORY NOTES**

Nearly all our information about the first forty-six years of Sterne's life before he became famous as the author of *Tristram Shandy* is derived from a short memoir jotted down by himself for the use of his daughter. This memoir gives nothing but the barest facts, excepting three anecdotes about his infancy, his school days and his marriage. Conversely, for the last eight years of his life, after the sudden leap out of obscurity caused by his literary success, we have a faithful record of Sterne's feelings and movements in letters to various persons (published in 1775 by his daughter, Lydia Sterne de Medalle) and in the 1766-1767 *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (also published in 1775) <sup>1</sup>.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Laurence Sterne was the great-grandson of Richard Sterne, Archbishop of York and Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. Laurence's father, Roger Sterne, was a Yorkshire soldier who served as an officer in Flanders under the Duke of Marlborough during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714). His mother, Agnes, the widow of another English army officer, married Roger Sterne while he was on campaign in Dunkirk in 1711.

Laurence was born on 24 November 1713 at Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (Ireland), where his father's regiment was stationed. Sterne spent his early childhood following the regiment's many transfers both in Ireland and England, and this close contact with military life would later inspire him for the creation of some of his most notable comic characters (especially Uncle Toby, Corporal Trim and Lieutenant Le Fever in *Tristram Shandy*).

In 1723, after ten years of wandering (Dublin, Devonshire, Isle of Wight, County Wicklow, Mullingar), Laurence was handed over to a relation in Elvington (Yorkshire), and sent to a grammar-school at Hipperholme, near Halifax, where he learned Latin and Greek <sup>2</sup>. In 1727, Sterne's father was seriously wounded in a duel. He never fully recovered from the wound and died suddenly in March 1731 .

In July 1733, Sterne was admitted at Jesus College, Cambridge, where his great-grandfather (the Archbishop) had been master. He took his B.A. degree in 1736 and proceeded M.A. in 1740. In his last year, a haemorrhage of the lungs was the first sign of the consumption that was to trouble him for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, young Sterne had took orders, and in 1738, through his uncle's influence (Jaques Sterne was choirmaster and canon of York), obtained the living of Sutton-on-the-Forest, about eight miles north of York.

In 1741 Sterne married Elizabeth Lumley, a cousin to Elizabeth Montagu, the bluestocking, and in 1747 their daughter, Lydia, was born. Living the life of a rural parson, Sterne kept his residence at Sutton for about two generally uneventful decades. During these years he kept up a close friendship which had begun at Cambridge with a distant cousin from Yorkshire, John Hall-Stevenson (1718-1785), a witty and accomplished epicurean, owner of Skelton Hall (also known as "Crazy Castle"), in the Cleveland district of Yorkshire.

Skelton Hall is nearly forty miles from Sutton, but Sterne, in spite of his double duties (he was also vicar of the neighbouring living of Stillington and prebendary, or canon, of York Minster), seems to have been a frequent visitor there, and to have found in his rather eccentric friend a highly congenial companion. Sterne is thought to have never formally become a member of the circle of merry squires and clerics at Skelton known as “The Demoniacks”, but certainly he must have shared their revelries on and off<sup>3</sup>.

In 1747 Sterne published a sermon preached in York under the title of *The Case of Elijah*. This was followed in 1750 by *The Abuses of Conscience*, afterwards inserted in Vol. II of *Tristram Shandy*. In 1759 he wrote a sketch on a quarrel between his Dean and a York lawyer, a sort of Swiftian satire of dignitaries of the spiritual courts which gave an earnest of Sterne's powers as a humorist. At the demands of embarrassed churchmen, however, the book was burned: thus, if on one hand Sterne lost his chances for clerical advancement, on the other he ended up discovering his real talents<sup>4</sup>.

Sterne's marriage, which had never been truly happy, reached a crisis in 1758, when his wife, after learning of an affair with a maid-servant, had a nervous breakdown and was eventually placed under the care of a doctor in a private house in York. As Sterne's own health continued to fail, he progressively fell into a state of melancholy: it was in this atmosphere of gloom and despondency that *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, one of the most light-hearted books in the whole of literature, was begun. Sterne completed fourteen chapters in six weeks and promised to write two volumes a year for the rest of his life. A first, sharply satiric version of the novel was initially rejected by the London printer Robert Dodsley. Sterne continued his comic novel, but every sentence, he said, was “written under the greatest heaviness of heart”. In this mood, he decided to soften the satire and describe Tristram's opinions, his eccentric family, and ill-fated childhood with a sympathetic humour, sometimes hilarious, sometimes sweetly melancholic – a comedy skirting tragedy.

Sterne himself published the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* at York late in 1759, but he sent half of the imprint to Dodsley. By March 1760, when he went to London, *Tristram Shandy* was the rage, and Sterne became instantly famous. The news of his presence there soon spread, visitors thronged to his rooms in St Alban's Street, and invitations to fashionable dinners and receptions abounded. The witty, naughty “*Tristram Shandy*”, or “*Parson Yorick*”, as Sterne was called after characters in his novel, was the most sought-after man in town: London was charmed with his audacity, wit and graphic unconventional power. However, he was also much criticized: while Dr. Johnson, who did not appreciate his use of indecent allusions, mistakenly declared “Nothing odd will do long”, readers from York were particularly scandalized at its clergyman's indecency, and indignant at his often scurrilous caricatures of well-known local figures, such as the male midwife Dr. Slop.

When a second edition of the first instalment of *Tristram* was called for in three months, two volumes of *Sermons by Yorick* were also announced. Although they had little or none of the eccentricity of the history, they proved almost as popular (in the novel, Sterne had portrayed himself in the character of Parson Yorick). Lord Fauconberg presented the author of *Tristram Shandy* with the perpetual curacy of Coxwold, and in the summer of 1760 the Sterne family returned to Yorkshire, where they moved into a charming old cottage, renamed “*Shandy Hall*” after Sterne's literary hero<sup>5</sup>.

Sterne wrote two more volumes of *Tristram Shandy* and, the following Christmas, he returned to London to superintend their publication. These volumes appeared in January 1761, to the same chorus of praise and criticism as the earlier volumes. Fashionable society welcomed him back and for another three months he was immersed in social life. When he returned to “*Shandy Hall*”, he continued to work on *Tristram Shandy*, and the fifth and sixth volumes were completed by December 1761. While supervising the publication of these volumes in London, he suffered a severe haemorrhage of the lungs, and a journey to the south of France was hastily arranged for his health's sake. Obtaining a year's absence from his post from the Archbishop of York, he left for Paris in January 1762. This and a later trip abroad gave him much material for his later *Sentimental Journey*.

Sterne's fame had preceded him to Paris and he was welcomed in much the same way as he had been in London. His health temporarily improved, and, in May 1762, he sent for his wife, now recovered, and his daughter, who was suffering from asthma. In July, following a relapse of his health, they left for Toulouse, where they stayed for a year. Sterne spent the year writing a seventh volume of *Tristram Shandy*, incorporating some of his experiences in France into the story. In July 1763, the family visited the Pyrenees, Aix-en-Provence and Marseilles, and in September 1763, they settled in Montpellier for the winter. In March 1764 Sterne resolved to return to England, but his wife did not share his desire to leave and decided to stay in France with Lydia, while she completed her education. Having accepted his wife's wish, Sterne spent most of the summer in London, and then returned to *Shandy Hall* in the autumn, where he soon immersed himself in an eighth volume of *Tristram*

Shandy. The seventh and eighth volumes were published on 26th January 1765.

In October 1765, Sterne set out for a seven months' tour through France and Italy, which was later immortalised in his second novel, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, by Mr. Yorick*. He passed through Paris and Lyons to Turin, where he began his tour through Italy in the company of Sir James Macdonald, a cultivated young man then resident in Italy. He visited Milan, Parma, Florence, Rome and Naples, and, on his return through France, he visited his wife and daughter. Elizabeth had decided that she could manage better without him, and begged to stay abroad for another year. Thus, in June 1766 Sterne returned alone to Yorkshire for the second time, where his main companion, now that he was separated from his family, was his old friend John Hall-Stevenson. By this time Sterne was seriously short of money, having spent most of his literary earnings on his foreign tours. Having a family abroad to support, he set about repairing his financial position, by means of the sales of the ninth and final volume of *Tristram Shandy* (completed in the autumn).

In December 1766, Sterne was in London again, where he met Mrs. Eliza Draper, the wife of Daniel Draper, an official of the East India Company, and fell in love with her. They carried on an open, sentimental flirtation, but Eliza was under a promise to return to her husband in Bombay. Sterne never saw her again, but he was not willing to let the relationship go. He sent her his books, and, having had her portrait painted, wore it round his neck. With half an eye on posterity, he kept a "Journal to Eliza", modelled on Swift's *Journal to Stella*, and also *A Sentimental Journey* is full of references to Eliza, to the portrait, and his vows of eternal fidelity to her.

On returning to Yorkshire, he was visited by his wife and daughter in August 1767, but, since they continued to find each other's company insupportable, he and his wife finally came to an agreement that she and Lydia should return to the South of France, with an improved financial allowance, and never return to England. Sterne seems to have been content with this arrangement, although he also seems to have been upset at being parted from his daughter, for whom he had a genuine affection. By December 1767, two volumes of *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, by Mr. Yorick*, were completed, and Sterne set off with John Hall-Stevenson for London to superintend their publication early in 1768.

In March, he fell ill with influenza, and on the 18th he died.

Legend has it that soon after burial at London, Sterne 's body was stolen by grave robbers and sold for the purpose of dissection to the professor of anatomy at Cambridge. Luckily, his features were recognised by a student at the dissecting table, and the body was quietly returned to the grave<sup>6</sup>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The holograph manuscript of Sterne's memoir – *Sterne's Memoirs*:

A Hitherto Unrecorded Holograph Now Brought to Light in Facsimile, with introduction and commentary by Kenneth Monkman (Coxwold, privately printed for The Laurence Sterne Trust, 1985) – is now on permanent loan to “Shandy Hall”, Coxwold. A detailed biography (TRAILL, H. D., “Sterne”, *English Men of Letters Series*, 1882) is available online: <<http://www.authorama.com/sterne-1.html>>. A more recent and equally thorough source of reference is: ROSS, Ian Campbell, *Laurence Sterne: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2001). For a selection of Sterne's correspondence: CURTIS, Lewis Perry, ed., *Letters of Laurence Sterne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935, 1967<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> “When we read over the siege of Troy, which lasted ten years and eight months, -- though with such a train of artillery as we had at Namur, the town might have been carried in a week -- was I not as much concerned for the destruction of the Greeks and Trojans as any boy of the whole school? Had I not three strokes of a ferula given me, two on my right hand and one on my left, for calling Helena a bitch for it? Did any one of you shed more tears for Hector? And when king Priam came to the camp to beg his body, and returned weeping back to Troy without it, -- you know, brother, I could not eat my dinner” (*Tristram Shandy*, Vol. VI, Ch. XXXII).

<sup>3</sup> John Hall-Stevenson's various occasional sallies in verse and prose - his *Fables for Grown Gentlemen* (1761 - 1770), *Crazy Tales* (1762) and *Makarony Fables* (1767), which were all mainly political sketches against the opponents of John Wilkes, the parliamentary reformer - were collected after his death, and it is impossible to read them without being struck with their close family resemblance in spirit and turn of thought to Sterne's work, inferior as they are in literary genius. Hall-Stevenson was also said to be the original of Eugenius in *Tristram Shandy*. For a commentary on Hall-Stevenson's *Crazy Tales*, see <<http://www.bartleby.com/221/0820.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> The sketch would not be published until 1769, the year after Sterne's death, when it appeared under the title *A Political Romance* (and later *The History of a Good Warm Watch-Coat*).

<sup>5</sup> “Shandy Hall” is now a museum.

<sup>6</sup> The story, only whispered at the time, was confirmed in 1969: Sterne 's remains were exhumed and now rest in the churchyard at Coxwold, close to Shandy Hall.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1713 born in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, Ireland
- 1723 sent to grammar-school in Halifax, Yorkshire
- 1733 admitted at Jesus College, Cambridge
- 1736 BA, Jesus College, Cambridge
- 1738 takes orders and obtains the living of Sutton-in-the-Forest, Yorkshire
- 1740 MA, Jesus College, Cambridge; contracts tuberculosis
- 1741 marries Elizabeth Lumley
- 1747 daughter Lydia born; publishes sermon entitled *The Case of Elijah*
- 1750 publishes sermon *The Abuses of Conscience*
- 1758 marriage crisis
- 1759 writes his first satirical sketch (published posthumously in 1769 under the title *A Political Romance*, later *History of a Warm Watch-Coat*)
- 1760 *Tristram Shandy* (Vols. I-II) published in London and York; moves to "Shandy Hall", Coxwold, Yorkshire
- 1761 *Tristram Shandy* (Vols. III-IV) published in London
- 1762 *Tristram Shandy* (Vols. V-VI) published in London
- 1762-1764 moves to France (first Paris, then Toulouse and Montpellier)
- 1765 *Tristram Shandy* (Vols. VII-VIII) published in London
- 1765-1766 travels to France and Italy
- 1766-1767 love-affair with Mrs. Eliza Draper
- 1767 *Tristram Shandy* (Vol. IX) published in London
- 1768 *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, by Mr. Yorick published in London soon before his death (March 18)
- 1775 daughter Lydia edits and publishes *Sterne's Letters and Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (written 1766-1767)