

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

(1751-1816)

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin on 30th October 1751. Sheridan's parents moved to London, and in 1762, he was sent to Harrow School. After six years at Harrow, he went to live with his father in Bath who had found employment there as an elocution teacher.

In March 1772, Sheridan eloped to France with a young woman called Elizabeth Linley. A marriage ceremony was carried out at Calais but soon afterwards the couple were caught by the girl's father. As a result of this behaviour, Sheridan was challenged to a duel. The fight took place on 2nd July 1772, during which Sheridan was seriously wounded. However, Sheridan recovered and after qualifying as a lawyer, Mr. Linley gave permission for the couple to marry.



Sheridan began writing plays, and on 17th January 1775, the Covent Garden Theatre produced his comedy *The Rivals*. After a poor reception it was withdrawn. A revised version appeared soon after and it eventually become one of Britain's most popular comedies. Two other plays by Sheridan, *St. Patrick's Day* and *The Duenna*, were also successfully produced at the Covent Garden Theatre. In 1776, Sheridan joined with his father-in-law to purchase the Drury Lane Theatre for £35,000. The following year, he produced his most popular comedy, *The School for Scandal*.

In 1776, Sheridan met Charles Fox, the leader of the Radical Whigs in the House of Commons. Sheridan now decided to abandon his writing in favour of a political career. On 12th September 1780, Sheridan became MP for Stafford. Sheridan was a frequent speaker in the House of Commons and soon obtained a reputation as one of the best orators in Britain. Sheridan was a strong critic of Lord North's American policy and supported the resistance of the colonists. Congress was so grateful for Sheridan's support that he was offered a reward of £20,000. Under attack for disloyalty to his country, Sheridan decided not to accept the gift.

In 1782 the Marquis of Rockingham appointed Sheridan as his Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. The following year, he served in the coalition ministry headed by William Pitt. Sheridan retained his radical political beliefs, and in 1794, defended the French Revolution against its critics in the House of Commons. Despite his disapproval of some aspects of the new regime, Sheridan argued that the French people had the right to form their own form of government without outside interference.

Sheridan was also a strong supporter of an uncensored press and argued strenuously against attempts to use the libel laws to prevent criticism of the government. In 1798, he argued: "The press should be unfettered, that its freedom should be, as indeed it was, commensurate with the freedom of the people and the well-being of a virtuous State; on that account even one hundred libels had better be ushered into the world than one prosecution be instituted which might endanger the liberty of the press of this country."

Sheridan opposed the Act of Union with Ireland and lost office when Henry Addington replaced William Pitt as Prime Minister. Sheridan refused Addington's offer of a peerage in return for supporting the Tories with the words that he had "an unpurchasable mind". Sheridan remained a devoted follower of Charles Fox, until his death in 1806.

In 1806, Sheridan returned to the government as treasurer of the navy. However, he was defeated in the general election of 1807, but soon afterwards found a seat at Ilchester. In 1812, Sheridan attempted to win his old seat of Stafford, but unable to raise the money to pay the normal fee of five guineas per voter, he was defeated. Sheridan had serious financial problems, and in August, 1813 was arrested for debt. Sheridan was only released when his wealthy friend, Samuel Whitbread handed over the sum required.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan died in abject poverty on 7th July 1816.

"Richard Brinsley Sheridan", **Spartacus Educational**, www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PRsheridan.htm

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