





THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

Johnson Club Papers



Johnson Club
Papers
by
Various Hands
London
T. Fisher Unwin
1920

First published in 1920

[All rights reserved.]

PR
3532
A4
ser. 2

PREFACE



THIS Club was formed on the 13th day of December, 1884, at the "Cock Tavern," Fleet Street, London. The day was exactly one hundred years from Dr. Johnson's death, and the place was often visited by him.

Since 1884 the Club has met four times yearly, at first usually in a tavern, but of late years in Johnson's house in Gough Square, saved from destruction by the liberality of Cecil Harmsworth, a brother of the Johnson Club.

In the year 1899, the Club published a volume of Papers read at its quarterly suppers. Of the eleven contributors to that volume five have been gathered to their fathers and to Johnson. The editors are among the survivors, and now it has fallen to them to collect a second series of papers for the press. The war has delayed publication, and the Club now mourns the loss of three of the present contributors. Adapting

3532

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

a phrase of the Master's, we say "Sint animæ eorum cum Johnsono."

Some of these papers have already appeared in print, Sir Chartres Biron's in the *National Review*, Mr. Walkley's and Mr. Clodd's in the *Fortnightly Review*, and Mr. Haynes's in the *New Witness*. We desire to thank the editors of these Reviews for their courtesy.

G. W.

J. S.

LONDON, *September* 1920.

CONTENTS



	PAGE
Dr. Johnson and Dr. Dodd. <i>By Sir Chartres Biron</i>	13
Dr. Johnson and Lord Monboddo. <i>By Edward Clodd</i>	31
Dr. Johnson on Liberty. <i>By E. S. P. Haynes</i>	57
Dr. Johnson's Expletives. <i>By the late Spencer Leigh Hughes, M.P.</i>	67
Dr. Johnson and Ireland. <i>By John O'Connor, K.C., M.P.</i>	87
Johnson's Dictionary. <i>By the late Sir George Radford, M.P.</i>	103
Dr. Johnson and the Law. <i>By E. S. Roscoe</i> .	125
Dr. Johnson and the Catholic Church. <i>By the Hon Sir Charles Russell, Bart.</i> .	139
Johnson's Character as shown in his Writings. <i>By Harold Spencer Scott</i>	159
Sir Joshua Reynolds. <i>By L. C. Thomas</i> .	181
Johnson and the Theatre. <i>By A. B. Walkley</i>	199
Johnson's Monument and Parr's Epitaph on Johnson. <i>By the late Henry B. Wheatley, D.C.L., F.S.A.</i>	221



The Johnson Club

(Founded Dec. 13, 1884)



Officers for 1920



Prior—WILLIAM A. McARTHUR.

Sub-Prior—E. S. ROSCOE.

Bursar—T. FISHER UNWIN.

Scribe—J. FREDK. GREEN, M.P.



List of Members

ARTHUR J. ASHTON, K.C. (Recorder of Manchester.)

SIR CHARTRES BIRON.

RT. HON. AUGUSTINE BIRRELL, K.C.

SIR W. RYLAND D. ADKINS, K.C., M.P.

EDWARD CLODD.

ARUNDELL ESDAILE.

J. FREDK. GREEN, M.P.

CECIL HARMSWORTH, M.P.

FRANCIS R. HARRIS.

E. S. P. HAYNES.

JOHN HENDERSON.

RT. HON. SIR GORDON HEWART, M.P. (Attorney-General).

SIR ROBERT A. HUDSON, G.B.E.

ROGER INGPEN.

SIR SIDNEY LEE.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

FRANK D. MACKINNON, K.C.

JOHN O'CONNOR, K.C.

EDWARD S. ROSCOE.

HON. SIR CHARLES RUSSELL, Bart.

GEOFFREY WILLIAM RUSSELL.

JOHN SARGEAUNT.

HAROLD S. SCOTT.

THOMAS SECCOMBE.

CLEMENT SHORTER.

ARTHUR H. SPOKES (Recorder of Reading).

L. C. THOMAS.

JAMES TREGASKIS.

T. FISHER UNWIN.

ARTHUR B. WALKLEY.

GEORGE WHALE.

GEORGE H. WHEATLEY.



Honorary Members

OSCAR BROWNING.

RT. HON. SIR MORTIMER DURAND, G.C.M.G

J. GENNADIUS.

SIR FRANCIS C. GOULD.

WILLIAM A. McARTHUR.

JOSEPH PENNELL.

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB

BY

SIR CHARTRES BIRON.



Dr. Johnson and Dr. Dodd



THE description of Dr. Dodd in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as “Dodd, William, 1729–77, forger,” is the very nakedness of truth. To such a crude departure from the lapidary convention one would almost prefer oblivion. Accurate though it unfortunately is, one cannot help feeling a certain sympathy for the unhappy subject. If his offence was serious, the punishment was terrible, and the forgery was undoubtedly rather the act of a weak, unprincipled man impelled by the pressure of events than that of a deliberate criminal. It certainly so appeared to Dr. Johnson. When all efforts to save Dodd had failed, Johnson wrote to him in prison : “Be comforted, your crime, morally or religiously considered, has no very deep dye of turpitude. It corrupted no man’s principles : it attacked no man’s life. It involved only a temporary and reparable injury.” Dr. Dodd’s faults of character were just those that with an adequate income become almost virtues. Like Becky Sharp, he would have found

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

it comparatively easy to be good on £5,000 a year. His talents were considerable, his social gifts undeniable—a kindly, hospitable man; but hospitality on an inadequate income is a dangerous virtue. Dr. Johnson describes him well as a man whom we have seen exulting in popularity and sunk in shame. For his reputation, which no man can give to himself, those who conferred it are to answer—of his public Ministry the means of judging were sufficiently attainable. He must be allowed to preach well, whose sermons strike his audience with forcible conviction. Of his life those who thought it consistent with his doctrine did not originally form false notions. He was at first what he endeavoured to make others, but the world broke down his resolution, and he in time ceased to exemplify his own instructions.

The son of the Vicar of Bourne, in Lincolnshire, Dodd went to Cambridge at sixteen, where he entered as a sizar at Clare College, and graduated as fifteenth wrangler. After Cambridge he sought his fortunes in London. In 1751 he married Mary Perkins, the daughter of a verger, in Durham Cathedral. Unfortunately the marriage was hardly so idyllic as it sounds. The lady was not above reproach, even if she were not, as Horace Walpole asserted, Lord Sandwich's mistress, and there can be little doubt her influence and extravagance contributed in no small degree to her husband's downfall. After being suspected of a novel, facetious in the sense

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

that the word bears in the booksellers' catalogues, he turned his attention to the Church.

Dodd was ordained a deacon in 1751, and started his ecclesiastical career as a curate at West Ham. His success was immediate. Dodd was one of the rare examples of an eloquent mathematician. In the pulpit his natural gifts found congenial expression, and almost at once he became a popular preacher.

In 1758 a charitable institution was opened for the purpose of assisting unfortunate women, under the name of Magdalen House. Dodd was appointed chaplain, and a regular salary of £100 a year was voted him. Besides his clerical duties, Dr. Dodd found time for literature. His *Beauties of Shakespeare* had a great vogue and showed a real feeling for literature. Altogether he wrote some fifty-five volumes, ranging from a commentary on the Bible, published shortly after his appointment to the Royal Chaplaincy, to *Diggon Davie's Resolution on the Death of his Last Cow*, and including, with a horrible irony, a dissertation on *Frequency of Capital Punishments, inconsistent with Justice, Sound Policy, and Religion*.

The new charity appealed to the public. It became a hobby of the fashionable world, largely owing to Dr. Dodd's eloquence. Horace Walpole describes a visit in a letter to George Montagu : " We met at Northumberland House at 5, and set out in four coaches. Prince Edward, Colonel Brudenel, his groom, Lady Northumberland, Lady Mary Coke, Lady Carlisle, Miss Pelham, Lady Hertford,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Lord Beauchamp, Lord Huntingdon, old Bowman, and I." Such was the party. The chapel is described as small and low but neat, hung with Gothic paper. The service consisted of prayers, psalms, and a sermon, "the latter by a young clergyman, one Dodd, who contributed [it appears Horace Walpole's Protestantism had been a little scandalized by the Catholic atmosphere of the place] to the Popish idea one had imbibed by haranguing entirely in the French style, and very eloquently and touchingly he apostrophysed the lost sheep, who sobbed and cried from their souls"—and must have done it very well, for "so did my Lady Hertford and Fanny Pelham till I believe the city dames took them both for Jane Shores," and we learn that the preacher concluded by "addressing himself to his Royal Highness, whom he called most illustrious Prince, beseeching his protection" so successfully that Horace Walpole declared the sermon "a very pleasing performance" and got "the most illustrious," who sat before the altar in an armchair with a blue damask cushion, a prie-dieu, and a footstool of black cloth with gold nails, "to desire it might be printed," and Dr. Dodd, whether to remove any misapprehension or not, composed a poem on the Countess's tears. Mrs. Papendick, Assistant-Keeper of the Wardrobe and Robes to Queen Charlotte, writes, "Dr. Dodd was handsome in the extreme, and possessed every personal attraction which would add to the beauty of the service—an harmonious voice, a heart of passion, and

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

the power of showing he felt his subject deeply."

His fame as a preacher spread. If money were wanted for a charity, a sermon from Dr. Dodd was the way to get it. In 1767 he received the distinguished honour of being appointed chaplain to George III, and at the same time chaplain to the Bishop of St. Davids, who also made him Prebendary of Brecon. In the same year he became tutor to Philip Stanhope, afterwards Lord Chesterfield. If misfortunes are often blessings in disguise the converse is sometimes true, and it was a bad day for Dodd when he was introduced to Chesterfield.

However, for the moment his star was in the ascendant. Fortune smiled even on the verger's daughter. She receives a legacy of £1,500 from a source as to which history is discreetly silent, and wins £1,000 in a lottery. This was her husband's opportunity. Most prudently he invested the money in a chapel in Pimlico, called Charlotte Chapel after the queen. No money was ever better laid out. The fashionable world flocked to Pimlico. He became an eighteenth-century Charles Honeyman. The Charlotte Chapel was as thronged as Lady Whittlesea's, and, as in the latter place of worship, "all the nobs came to hear him." Success was assured. It is true a censorious world gossiped. His attentions to the female portion of his congregation were a little marked. Ribald people called him "the

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Macaroni parson," and alleged an over-fondness for the good things of this world.

Still his congregation remained staunch and all went well till in an unfortunate moment for Dodd, Dr. Moss was made Bishop of Bath and Wells. This left vacant the fashionable living of St. George's, Hanover Square, said to be worth £1,500 a year. Dodd was undoubtedly in pecuniary difficulties. An anonymous letter was written to Lady Apsley, wife of the Lord Chancellor of the time, offering her £3,000 and an annuity of £500 a year for the vacant preferment.

The letter was traced to Dodd.

The poor Simonist adopted the usual formula of his kind. He wrote a dignified letter to the papers, saying that at the proper time, in spite of deceptive appearances, all would be cleared up. But it would not do. The facts were too blatant, and he was struck off the list of Royal Chaplains.

It was the beginning of the end. The scandal was public property. Foote put him in a farce under the name of Mrs. Simony, and Dodd found the moment opportune for foreign travel. At Geneva Dodd visited his former pupil, now Lord Chesterfield. Despite all he was well received—it may be the full details of the scandal had not reached that peaceful spot—and he was presented by his noble patron to a living in Buckinghamshire. Encouraged by this preferment, he returned to England, and found, at any rate, the Magdalen House faithful to its chaplain,

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

for his portrait was soon after painted and hung in the board-room.

All might yet have been well had it not been for his fatal debts. Whether they were due to his gambling and riotous living or his wife's extravagance matters little. Their total remained the same, and the creditors were equally importunate. Something had to be done, and in his case there was no Colonel Newcome to appeal to—Charlotte Chapel is sold.

Poor Dodd, in the language of a contemporary, even “descended so low as to become the editor of a newspaper.”

All to no avail ; and then the fatal step was taken.

In 1777 Dodd offered a bond for £4,200 in the name of *Lord Chesterfield* to a stockbroker named Robertson. For this amount Dodd undertook to pay £700 a year—Robertson finds a lender on these terms. The bond is lodged with the solicitor to the confiding lender, who, with a professional lack of charity, formed certain suspicions and went to see Lord Chesterfield, and all was over. As to the forgery there could be no doubt, but Dodd was certainly unfortunate. Warrants were issued against him and Robertson. They were arrested and brought before the Lord Mayor. If the solicitor had not been in such a hurry the situation might have been saved.

Dodd returned £3,000 and offered security for the balance. It may fairly be assumed, with regard to the solicitor and his client, the money was what

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

they wanted. The prosecution was satisfied ; but it was too late : the criminal law had been set in motion, and the Lord Mayor of the day could only be obdurate. The result of the investigation at the Mansion House was to clear Robertson, who seems to have been an innocent dupe, and to send Dr. Dodd to the Old Bailey.

In this matter Lord Chesterfield has been somewhat unfairly attacked. For years he was regarded as one who had acted with unnecessary harshness to his old tutor and friend. Long afterwards, when rallying a brother peer, who had shot a highwayman in self-defence, with the question, "When did you kill a highwayman last?" he was met with the retort, "When did you last hang a parson?" Yet it is difficult to see how Lord Chesterfield could have acted otherwise. He did not set the law in motion—nor was he the prosecutor. He gave evidence, it is true, but that he couldn't avoid. If he might have done more to save Dodd from execution, it must be remembered in fairness he had helped him at the time of his disgrace, and was rewarded almost immediately by the forgery of his name by the man he had befriended.

The trial at the Old Bailey could only have one result and one sentence. The bare question left was—could Dodd's life be saved? Great efforts were made. It says much for the man's character that he should have endeared himself to so many. About his social qualities there can be no doubt.

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

Sir Nathaniel Wraxall, who knew him well and dined at his house, describes him "as a plausible, agreeable man, lively, entertaining, well informed, and communicative in conversation." But there must have been more in the Doctor to have made so many do so much for him.

It was no less a person than Caroline, daughter of the Duke of Grafton and wife of the Earl of Harrington, who enlisted Dr. Johnson on behalf of the prisoner. Johnson's acquaintance with him was of the slightest. He had met him once, years before ; nor could they have had much in common. We know how "mighty offensive" Dr. Johnson found the public "levity of parsons," and he would probably have thought taverns as unsuitable for prebendaries as he did for bishops. The Doctor, too, had a magnificent philosophy concerning friendship. As to feeling the distresses of others, "there was much noise made about it, but it was much exaggerated." In fact, "no one ate a slice of plum pudding the less because a friend was hanged," and so forth.

But the Doctor as a philosopher always reminds one of his friend Mr. Edwards, who "set out to be a philosopher, but cheerfulness kept breaking in." So with Johnson ; admirable though his theories, when it came to action his humanity broke in with results equally fatal. He was one of the few philosophers who kept his rules of conduct for home consumption and shrank from applying them to the

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

outside world. Dodd had one claim the magnanimous Johnson never could resist. He was in sore distress. Here was a poor weak, erring mortal, and a chance of saving him. To the stout old Doctor there was only one thing to be done, and with all the latent energy of an indolent man he threw himself into the struggle.

Allen the printer, who was Johnson's landlord in Bolt Court, and also a great friend of the convicted man, carried the Countess's letter to Johnson. We are told Johnson read it, was very much agitated, and said, "I will do what I can," and he certainly did. Sentence had been postponed in order to argue a point of law taken in Dodd's favour. Dr. Johnson wrote the speech Dodd delivered before sentence of death was passed, and also wrote the sermon delivered in Newgate Chapel by Dodd to his fellow convicts.

Dodd writes to him : "I am so penetrated, my ever dear Sir, with a sense of your extreme benevolence towards me that I cannot find words equal to the sentiments of my heart. You are too conversant in the world to need the slightest hint from me of what infinite utility the speech on the awful day has been to me."

The sermon was afterwards published under the style, *The Convict's address to his unhappy brethren*. As to which a nice point of casuistry arose later on. Johnson complains to Boswell that Dr. Dodd should have left the world persuaded that the address was his own composition. Boswell reminds Johnson

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

that he, at any rate, contributed to the deception, "for when Mr. Seward expressed a doubt to you that it was not Dodd's own because it had a great deal more force of mind in it than anything known to be his you answered, 'Why should you think so? Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully.'"

Johnson, however, is not to be cornered.

"Sir, as Dodd got it from me to pass as his own, while that could do him any good, that was an implied promise that I should not own it. To own it, therefore, would have been telling a lie with the addition of breach of promise, which was more than simply telling a lie to make it be believed it was Dodd's. Besides, Sir, I did not directly tell a lie, I left the manner uncertain. Perhaps I thought that Seward would not believe it the less to be mine, for when I said that I would not put it in his power to say I had owned it."

The final thing Johnson wrote was *Dr. Dodd's last solemn declaration*, which was left with the sheriff at the place of execution. In this composition the passage occurs: "My life for some few unhappy years has been dreadfully hypocritical." This Dodd changed to "erroneous," with a note to the effect that "with hypocrisy he could not charge himself"; and perhaps was justified.

"Did not Dr. Johnson himself say on another occasion, 'Sir, are you so grossly ignorant of human

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

nature as not to know that a man may be very sincere in good principles without having good practice."

Poor Dodd was at any rate frank enough when his pious friends tried to console him by saying he was leaving "a wretched world." "No, no," he said, "it has been a very agreeable world to me." Johnson quaintly comments on this: "I respect Dodd for thus speaking the truth, for to be sure he had for several years enjoyed a life of great voluptuousness."

In addition to these efforts Johnson had written to the Lord Chancellor Bathurst, and Lord Mansfield, also a petition for mercy, signed by twenty thousand people, forwarded by the City of London; but much to his annoyance "They mended it."

Later on Dodd writes again, asking Johnson to compose for him a letter to be sent to the king. Johnson wrote the letter, writing at the same time to Dodd:

SIR,

I most seriously enjoin you not to let it be at all known that I have written this letter and to return the copy to Mr. Allen in a cover to me. I hope I need not tell you I wish it success, but do not indulge hope—tell nobody.

The letters were taken to Dodd in prison by Mr. Allen, who was a great friend of Akerman, the Governor of Newgate. Johnson had not the heart to see Dodd himself, as he said: "It would have done me more harm than it would have done him good."

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

According to Boswell, Johnson also wrote a petition from Mrs. Dodd to the queen, and observations in favour of a petition presented by Lord Percy printed in the newspapers. He certainly wrote to Charles Jenkinson, afterwards Lord Liverpool. But all in vain. The king refused to interfere. Poor Dodd, who had had great hopes—"They never will hang me," he said to his jailor—faced the position with a fortitude with which many would not have credited him.

To Johnson he writes before the end a letter of thanks. "Accept, thou great and good heart, my earnest and fervent thanks and prayers for all thy benevolent and kind efforts on my behalf." And the kind Doctor writes in reply the letter from which an extract has been given earlier, concluding with the touching request: "In requital of those well-intended offices which you are pleased so emphatically to acknowledge, let me beg that you make in 'your devotions' one petition for my eternal welfare."

Johnson thought he might have been pardoned. He writes to Boswell: "Poor Dodd was put to death yesterday in opposition to the recommendation of the Jury, the petition of the City of London, and a subsequent petition signed by three and twenty thousand hands. Surely the voice of the public when it calls so loudly and only for mercy ought to be heard." But it was not a merciful age. This extract from Mr. Lecky's history of the eighteenth century reveals the temper of the time:

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

“Dr. Dodd, the unhappy clergyman who was executed for forgery, was exhibited for two hours in the press-room at one shilling a head before he was led to the gallows.”

Wraxall asserts that Lord Mansfield, who had a good deal of the austerity of a Scotchman with a career, prevented the king exercising the prerogative of mercy. The women were on Dodd's side. Queen Charlotte was anxious to save him. The faithful Mrs. Papendiek visits Newgate some time after the execution, and writes : “There was his little inkstand upon a small table at which he constantly wrote, his chair, the table where he ate. I kissed them all—nothing had been used since he was called to leave all earthly scenes. His memory I must ever revere, for early did he lead me to like religion from the impressive manner in which he delivered his discourses and read the liturgy of our church.” Still, judged by the standard of the time, it would have been an unusual extension of clemency. Dodd's friends did not confine their efforts to petitions. According to Johnson, Dodd's City friends found a thousand pounds to be given the jailor if he would let him escape, and an image was made in wax, which was actually carried into the prison to be substituted for the fugitive forger. Johnson says he knew a man who walked about outside Newgate with £500 ready to be paid to any turnkey who could get him out ; but it was too late—the prisoner was closely watched.

Their exertions did not rest even at this.

DR. JOHNSON AND DR. DODD

According to Miss Reynolds, sister of Sir Joshua Dodd had hopes up to the last.

Some medical friends had told him that his life might be saved if the knot were tied in a particular manner behind his ear. This would prevent the extinction of life if he were cut down at once. Then he was to be carried by his friends to a convenient place, where they would use their utmost efforts to restore vitality.

The hangman fixed the rope as desired and whispered to Dodd, "You must not move an inch," but he struggled, with a fatal result.

Wraxall tells much the same story. According to him Dodd and the executioner were observed whispering. Wraxall attributes the failure of the plot to the enormous crowd which attended the execution and prevented the body being removed with sufficient despatch. He declares: "His body was conveyed to a house in the City of London, where it underwent every scientific professional operation which it was hoped might restore circulation. Percival Pott, who was one of the most eminent of the surgeons of the day, was present to direct them." But it was not to be, and Dr. Dodd died on the scaffold.

When all was over there was a reaction in Dodd's favour, and in certain and feminine quarters a tendency to place the poor man on a pedestal he little deserved, but Doctor Johnson, who had worked so loyally to save him, showed his usual sound sense. "A friend of mine," he says, "came to me and told me that a

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

lady wished to have Dr. Dodd's picture in a bracelet and asked me for a motto. I said I could think of no better than *currat lex*. I was very willing to have him pardoned, that is to have the sentence changed to transportation, but when he was once hanged I did not wish he should be made a saint." That poor Dodd undoubtedly was not, but we may at any rate say this in his favour : many a worse man has had more leniency shown him.

*DR. JOHNSON AND LORD
MONBODDO*

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB

BY

EDWARD CLODD



Dr. Johnson and Lord Monboddo



ONE of Johnson's friends (conjectured by Dr. Birkbeck Hill to be a Mr. Bowles) says in a letter given in Boswell¹ that "Chymistry was always an interesting pursuit with Dr. Johnson. Whilst he was in Wiltshire he attended some experiments that were made by a physician at Salisbury on the new kinds of air. In the course of the experiments, frequent mention being made of Dr. Priestley, Dr. Johnson knit his brows, and in a stern manner inquired, 'Why do we hear so much of Dr. Priestley?' He was very properly answered, 'Sir, because we are indebted to him for these important discoveries.' On this Dr. Johnson appeared well content, and replied, 'Well, well, I believe we are; and let every man have the honour he has merited.'"

Boswell makes this the occasion of a splenetic attack on Priestley's "pernicious doctrines," adding, he says, in justice to Johnson, that "the Rev. Dr.

¹ Vol. iv. p. 237. (The references throughout to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* are from Dr. Birkbeck Hill's edition.)

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Parr has no grounds for the statement that ‘Johnson not only endured, but almost solicited an interview with Dr. Priestley.’” Priestley’s reputation can take care of itself. To quote Mr. Frederic Harrison : “ His versatility, eagerness, activity, and humanity ; the immense range of his curiosity in all things physical, moral, or social ; his place in science, in theology, in philosophy, and in politics ; his peculiar relation to the Revolution, and the pathetic story of his unmerited sufferings, may make him the hero of the eighteenth century.”¹

In vol. ii. p. 55, Boswell says that Johnson “seemed pleased to talk of Natural Philosophy. [As the quotation shows, this term, which we now restrict to physics, included natural history.] He told us that one of his first essays was a Latin poem upon the glowworm. I am sorry I did not ask where it was to be found.” Johnson’s shrewdness comes out in the following record, wherein Boswell shows himself a believer in the old superstition that when a scorpion is surrounded by a ring of fire it recognizes its fate and deliberately commits suicide by darting its sting into its head. Boswell says that when in Italy he had several times proved this by experiment “Johnson would not admit the fact. He said, ‘Maupertius² was of opinion that it does not kill itself, but dies of the heat ; that it gets to the centre

¹ *The Choice of Books*, p. 370.

² “A philosopher,” says Boswell, “whom the Great Frederick of Prussia loved and honoured.” (B. 1678, d. 1759.)

of the circle as the coolest place ; that its turning its tail in upon its head is only a convulsion, and that it does not sting itself. He said he would be satisfied if the great anatomist Morgagni,¹ after dissecting a scorpion on which the experiment had been tried, should certify that its sting had penetrated its head.'"²

Johnson seems to have had some hand in the arrangement of the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, but Dr. Birkbeck Hill is unable, after examination of that publication, to throw any light upon Johnson's share in the work. More germane to what has been said above is the tribute paid by Sir William Jones, noted for the impulse which he gave to the study of Sanscrit. In a discourse before the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 24th February 1785, he writes as follows : " One of the most sagacious men in this age, who continues, I hope, to improve and adorn it, Samuel Johnson [he had been dead ten weeks], remarked in my hearing that if Newton had flourished in ancient Greece he would have been worshipped as a divinity."

A curt reference to Buffon, whom Boswell pats on the back in a footnote as " highly instructive and entertaining,"³ and the story of the famous kick against a large stone by which Johnson thought he had completely refuted Berkeley's theory of matter, complete the references in Boswell, so far as I have

¹ Founder of pathological anatomy, professor in the University of Padua. (B. 1682, d. 1771.)

² Vol. ii. p. 54.

³ Vol. v. p. 229.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

been able to trace them, to Johnson's comments other than those which are the subject of this paper on the science of his day.¹ But the inclusion of the men already named only emphasizes the omission of reference, *e.g.* to Cavendish, who weighed the earth and discovered the constitution of water and of atmospheric air ; to Halley, famous in cometary astronomy ; to Herschel, discoverer of Uranus and of the true nature of the nebulæ ; to Brindley, constructor of the great canals ; to Arkwright, inventor of the spinning mill ; to Black, whose discoveries gave the first impulse to Watt's improvements in the steam-engine ; and last, but not least, to Hartley, pioneer in anthropology, to whom reference will be made later.

Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of the famous author of the *Origin of Species*, and still remembered as the author of the *Botanic Garden*, with its *Loves of the Plants*, burlesqued in the *Loves of the Triangles* in the *Antijacobin*, is named only in Johnson's diary of a *Journey into North Wales* under date of 8th July 1774. The *Loves of the Plants* was not published till 1789, five years after Johnson's death.

James Burnet, afterwards Lord Monboddo, was born in 1714 in the "wretched place, wild and naked, with a poor old house," so Boswell describes it, whence he afterwards took his title. First educated at the parish school of Laurencekirk, he was sent to Aberdeen University, where a pedantic professor taught him

¹ The limits of this paper exclude Johnson's talks about Adam Smith and David Hume.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

that all speculation not based on Aristotle or Plato was utter foolishness. That unfortunate, cramping lesson he never unlearned. Destined for the Bar, he went to Groningen to study Roman law, and in his twenty-second year settled in Edinburgh as an advocate. Twenty-five years passed before his elevation to the Bench under the title of Lord Monboddo—a promotion largely due to his skilful and successful advocacy of the claims of Alexander Douglas to the estates of that name, famous in legal annals as the “Douglas Case.” Six years afterwards, in 1773, he published the first volume of the *Origin and Progress of Language*, a work which was not completed till 1792; “the world had forgotten the previous tomes before the next was issued.” His second work, *Ancient Metaphysics*, appeared volume by volume between 1779 and 1799. They were a curious farrago, dealing with the origin of ideas as established to the author’s satisfaction, by Plato and Aristotle; with the invention of language and with the primitive state of man, whose original endowments of language, reason, and religion, Monboddo argued, had been forfeited by the Fall. The original part of his work was his anticipation of the now established theory of man’s fundamental relationship with the higher apes. How he reconciled this with his theory of degeneracy is not explained. Originally, man, so he asserts, possessed a tail, which he ultimately lost by the constant posture of sitting. In a letter to Sir John Pringle, a physician of some note in his day,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Monboddó writes under date 16th June 1773 :
“As to the humanity of the Ourang-Outang, and the story of the men with tails, I think neither the one nor the other is necessarily connected with my system, and if I am in error, I have only followed Linnæus, and I think I have given a better reason than he has done for the Ourang-Outang belonging to us ; I mean, his use of a stick. From which, and many other circumstances, it appears to me evident that he is much above the Simian race, to which I think you very rightly disclaim the relation of brother, though I think that race is of kin to us, though not so nearly related. For the large monkeys, or baboons, appear to me to stand in the same relation to us that the ass does to the horse, or our goldfinch to the canary-bird.”¹ He then quotes a yarn from Roeping, a Swedish traveller, of an animal produced by copulation between a baboon and a woman. Directly it was born it took to climbing on chairs and tables, at last reaching the top of the house, whence it fell and broke its neck. He tells of an ourang-outang which he had himself seen at Versailles—a specimen preserved in spirits, which, when alive, had shown all the intelligence of a man, and, quite like a rational being, had died of drink ! Monboddó may have found warrant in the saying of his contemporary Beaumarchais that “what distinguishes man from the brute is drinking without being thirsty and making

¹ *Lord Monboddó and Some of his Contemporaries*, by Prof. Knight. Pp. 84-85.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

love all the year round " ; although, be it said concerning the last-named matter, some anthropologists find evidence of a human pairing season in primitive times. He upholds his pet theory that men possessed tails on the ground that, a hundred and thirty years before, a Swedish skipper was reported to have seen a tribe of human creatures with caudal appendages in the Bay of Bengal.

Monboddo's contemporaries cared little for his dissertations on ancient philosophy and his attempts to prove the doctrine of the Trinity by the help of Plato and Aristotle. The sting of Monboddo's book was in its tail. He was laughed at by the wits, mourned over by the pious, and sneered at by his brother Judges. The story goes that one of these, Lord Kames, asked Monboddo to go before him into a room, saying, "Just to see your tail, my Lord."

In the sketch of Monboddo given by the late H. G. Graham in his brilliant *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* he portrays an attractive picture of the old Judge, who, as Farmer Burnett, proved himself "the kindest and absurdest of landlords, never removing a tenant or raising a rent when rents everywhere were rising."¹ He tells how the best and brightest of Edinburgh society, men of letters, women of fashion, gather at Monboddo's fortnightly suppers, the table decorated "after the manner of the ancients ; the claret flagons garlanded with roses, which also bestrewed the table *à la* Horace, and the

¹ Pp. 194.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

diet of strange fare with Spartan broth and *mulsum*.”¹ Among them was Lady Anne Lindsay, singing “Auld Robin Gray” as she knew best how to sing it, and she alone knew who wrote it, while the light of the company was Monboddo’s beautiful and fragile younger daughter, whose death at the age of twenty-five darkened the remaining years of her father. It was of her that Burns said, when asked if he admired her : “I admire God Almighty more than ever. Miss Burnett is the most heavenly of all His works” ; and of her he wrote thus in his *Address to Edinburgh* :

Thy daughters bright thy walk adorn,
Gay as the gilded summer sky,
Sweet as the dewy, milk-white thorn,
Dear as the raptured thrill of joy !
Fair Burnet strikes th’ adoring eye ;
Heaven’s beauties on my fancy shine
I see the Sire of Love on high,
And own His work indeed divine !

Devoted to old friends, and fond of London, Monboddo started on horseback—he would never enter a stage-coach—in 1799 to make his annual visit there, and died upon the journey.

In a letter to Lady Ossory dated 3rd November 1782, Horace Walpole says : “Does your Ladyship know that Lord Monboddo has twice proposed to Mrs. Garrick ? She refused him ; I don’t know whether because he says in his book that men were born with tails or because they have lost them.”²

¹ Sweetened wine.

² Vol. xii. p. 360, Toynbee’s edition.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

(Monboddo's wife had died on the birth of her beautiful daughter.)

Concerning him, Scott wrote as follows in a note on *Guy Mannering* : " The conversation of the excellent old man, his high, gentleman-like, chivalrous spirit, the learning and wit with which he defended his fanciful paradoxes, the kind and liberal spirit of his hospitality, must render the *noctes cænæque* dear to all who, like the author (though then young), had the honour of sitting at his board." ¹

I will now set down in chronological order the references to Monboddo in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The first is on 30th September 1769, when Boswell and Johnson dined together at the " Mitre."

I attempted to argue for the superior happiness of the savage life, upon the usual fanciful topicks.

JOHNSON. Sir, there can be nothing more false. The savages have no bodily advantages beyond those of civilized men. They have not better health, and as to care or mental uneasiness, they are not above it, but below it, like bears. No, Sir, you are not to talk such paradox; let me have no more on't. It cannot entertain, far less can it instruct. Lord Monboddo, one of your Scotch Judges, talked a great deal of such nonsense. I suffered *him*, but I will not suffer *you*.

BOSWELL. But, Sir, does not Rousseau talk such nonsense?

JOHNSON. True, Sir, but Rousseau knows he is talking nonsense, and laughs at the world for staring at him.²

¹ The passage to which this is a footnote runs thus: " I am of counsel with my old friend Burnet. I love the *cæna*, the supper of the Ancients, the pleasant meal and social glass that wash out of one's mind the cobwebs that business or gloom have been spinning in our brains all day."

² Vol. ii. pp. 73-4.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

This conversation took place four years before Monboddo published the first volume of his *Origin*, and that he and Johnson had met during one of Monboddo's yearly visits to London, probably at Mrs. Montagu's, where he was a frequent guest, is evident from the remark made by Johnson on his visit to Monboddo in 1773, "I little thought when I had the honour to meet your Lordship in London that I should see you at Monboddo."¹ On 13th April 1773, dining with Johnson at General Oglethorpe's, Boswell records :

I told him that Mrs. Macaulay said she wondered how he could reconcile his political principles with his moral ; his notions of inequality and subordination with wishing well to the happiness of all mankind, who might live so agreeably, had they all their portions of land, and none to domineer over another.

JOHNSON. Why, Sir, I reconcile my principles very well, because mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination. Were they to be in this pretty state of equality, they would soon degenerate into brutes ;—they would become Monboddo's nation—their tails would grow. Sir, all would be losers were all to work for all—they would have no intellectual improvement.²

In the following May, dining at Bennet Langton's, "he attacked Lord Monboddo's strange speculation on the primitive state of human nature, observing, 'Sir, it is all conjecture about a thing useless, even were it known to be true. Knowledge of all kinds is good. Conjecture as to things useful is good, but conjecture as to what it would be useful to know,

¹ Vol. v. p. 82.

² Vol. ii. p. 219.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

such as whether men went upon all fours, is very idle.' ”¹

Turning to Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Johnson* in 1773, which Dr. Birkbeck Hill has reprinted in the fifth volume of his edition of the *Life*, Boswell, as host on the occasion at his house in Edinburgh, says that one of the company, Sir Adolphus Oughton, “who had a very sweet temper, changed the discourse [which threatened to become hot on the authenticity of Ossian's poetry], grew playful, laughed at Lord Monboddo's notion of men having tails, and called him a Judge *a posteriori*, which amused Dr. Johnson, and thus hostilities were prevented.”² We talked of the *Ourang-Outang*, and of Lord Monboddo's thinking that he might be taught to speak. Dr. Johnson treated this with ridicule. Mr. Crosbie said that Lord Monboddo believed the existence of everything possible ; in short, that all which is *in posse* might be found *in esse*.

JOHNSON. But, Sir, it is as possible that the *Ourang-Outang* does not speak, as that he speaks. However, I shall not contest the point. I should have thought it not possible to find a Monboddo, yet *he* exists.³

Under date 21st August, five days after the foregoing, Boswell says : “I doubted much which road to take, whether to go by the coast, or by Laurencekirk and Monboddo. I knew Lord Monboddo and Dr. Johnson did not love each other, yet I was unwilling not to visit his Lordship, and was also curious to see

¹ Vol. ii. p. 259.

² Vol. v. p. 45.

³ *Ibid.* p. 46.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

them together.”¹ So he sent his servant with the following letter :

Montrose, Aug. 21.

MY DEAR LORD,

Thus far I am come with Mr. Samuel Johnson. We must be at Aberdeen to-night. I know you do not admire him so much as I do ; but I cannot be in this country without making you a bow at your old place, as I do not know if I may again have an opportunity of seeing Monboddo. Besides, Mr. Johnson says, he would go ten miles out of his way to see Monboddo. I have sent forward my servant, that we may know if your Lordship be at home.

I am ever, my dear Lord,

Most sincerely yours,

JAMES BOSWELL.²

Monboddo, who disengaged himself on purpose to meet Johnson, was graciousness itself in his reception, telling them that they “now saw him as *Farmer Burnet* ; that they would have a farmer’s dinner, adding, ‘I should not have forgiven Mr. Boswell had he not brought you here, Dr. Johnson.’” The conversation that followed need not here be quoted in full. Nothing was said about ourang-outangs or tailed men ; the talk was of Homer, general history, the decrease of learning, of emigration, and so forth, at the end of it Monboddo pressing his guests to stay the night. “When I said we *must* be at Aberdeen, Monboddo replied, ‘Well, I am like the Romans : I shall say to you, “Happy to come—happy to depart.”’”³ Gory, Monboddo’s black servant, was sent by him to put them on the right

¹ Vol. v. p. 74.

² *Ibid.* p. 394.

³ *Ibid.* p. 82.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

road on leaving. On parting from them "Dr. Johnson called to him : ' Mr. Gory, give me leave to ask you a question. Are you baptized ? ' Gory told him he was, and confirmed by the Bishop of Durham. He then gave him a shilling." Whether in the event of the answer having been "in the negative" the tip would have been reduced or altogether withheld, Boswell does not say.

Under date of 26th August Boswell writes as follows : " I called on Mr. Robertson, who was formerly Lord Monboddo's clerk, was three times in France with him, and translated Condamine's *Account of the Savage Girl*,¹ to which his Lordship wrote a preface, containing several remarks of his own. Robertson said he did not believe so much as his Lordship did ; that it was plain to him that the girl confounded what she imagined with what she remembered ; that besides, she perceived Condamine and Lord Monboddo forming theories and she adapted her story to them. Dr. Johnson said, ' It is a pity to see Lord Monboddo publish such notions as he has done ; a man of sense and of so much elegant learning. There would be little in a fool doing it : we should only laugh, but when a wise man does it, we are sorry. Other people have strange notions, but they conceal them. If they have tails, they hide them ; but Monboddo is as jealous of his tail as a squirrel.' I shall here [adds Boswell] put down

¹ Charles M. de la Condamine (1701-74) was a noted traveller, a pioneer explorer of the Amazons.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

some more remarks of Dr. Johnson's on Lord Monboddo, which were not made exactly at this time, but come in well from connection. He said he did not approve of a judge's calling himself *Farmer* Burnett and going about with a little round hat. He laughed heartily at his lordship's saying he was an *enthusiastical* farmer : ' for (said he) what can he do in farming by his *enthusiasm* ? ' Here, however, I think Dr. Johnson mistaken." Boswell's enlargement on this can here be omitted.¹

M. de la Condamine has further reference as reporting on a South American tribe who had no word for three. " ' This,' said Johnson, ' should be told to Monboddo ; it would help him. There is as much charity in helping a man downhill as in helping him uphill :

BOSWELL. I don't think there is as much charity.

JOHNSON. Yes, Sir, if his tendency be downwards, till he is at the bottom he flounders ; get him once there, and he is quiet.' " ²

Writing to Boswell on 27th August 1775, he says : " That Lord Monboddo and Mr. Macqueen should controvert a position contrary to the imaginary interest of literary or national prejudice, might be easily imagined ; but of a standing fact there ought to be no controversy. If there are men with tails, catch an *homo caudatus* ; if there was writing of old in the Highlands or Hebrides, in the Erse language, produce the manuscripts." ³

¹ Vol. v. pp. 110-11. ² *Ibid.* pp. 242-43. ³ Vol. ii. p. 383.

Monboddo, logical in his plea for "return to Antiquity," after his morning bath, "anointed himself with oil, in imitation of the ancients, his lotion being composed of rose-water, olive oil, saline, aromatic spirit, and Venetian soap" ¹ and then went to bed again. On Boswell mentioning this, Johnson remarked, "I suppose, Sir, there is no more in it than this, he awakes at four and cannot sleep till he chills himself, and makes the warmth of the bed a grateful sensation." ² The morning "tub" (like the early cup of tea, an import from the East) had not come into fashion in his day, and, if it had, I suspect that his plunges would have been fitful. Kit Smart "'did not love clean linen, and,' added Johnson, 'I have no passion for it.'" ³ The same can be said of many a saint of old.

Writing to him on 14th February 1777, Boswell says that Monboddo had asked for a copy of Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands*,⁴ and in the following September he has this reference to the book: "I read him a letter which Lord Monboddo had written to me, containing some critical remarks upon the style of his *Journey*. His lordship praised the very fine passage upon landing at Icolmkill, but his own style being exceedingly dry and hard, he disapproved of the richness of Johnson's language and of his frequent use of metaphorical expressions.

"JOHNSON: 'Why, Sir, this criticism would be

¹ Knight, p. 12.

² Vol. iii. p. 168.

³ Vol. i. p. 397.

⁴ Vol. iii. p. 102.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

just, if in my style, superfluous words, or words too big for the thoughts, could be pointed out, but this I do not believe can be done,' ” and so on, no resentment being shown towards a critic between whom and Johnson there were no cordial relations.

Upon these there is here no occasion to dwell, the “quarrels of authors” is a monotonous and profitless story. Temperamentally the two men were unlike, and their differences of opinion could not be reconciled by their agreement on one matter; namely, as to the *History* of Tacitus being rather notes for a history than an historical work. Monboddo was all for return to the ancients; Johnson was all for adapting their philosophy to the ideals of his time. He had said that “the magnetism of Lord Monboddo’s conversation easily drew us out of our way,”¹ but he would have been more or less than human if he had condoned Monboddo’s censorious charge in the *Origin of Language* that “Dr. Johnson was the most invidious and malignant man I have ever known.”² Johnson probably never saw Hume’s letter to Adam Smith of 24th February 1773, in which he thus comments on Monboddo’s book: “It contains all the absurdity and malignity which I suspected; but is writ with more ingenuity and in a better style than I looked for.”³

When all the limitations and absurdities of the shrewd,

¹ Vol. v. p. 74, etc.

² *Ibid.* p. 271.

³ Burton’s *Life of Hume*, vol. ii. p. 467.

learned judge are admitted and set aside, there remains the fact that this remarkable man was far ahead of his time ; that some of his speculations were anticipations of discoveries which have revolutionized thought and opinion in all directions ; that his was the creeping of the dawn when old things were passing away and all things were to become new. His theory of the development of man from the great apes was unsound, since each is the lateral descendant of a common ancestor, but it was no mean advance, with a mixture of daring at that time, especially in Scotland, to broach a theory which implicitly denied the special creation of man. Had he lived in our day, when comparative embryology is an established branch of biology, he would have learned that, although any outward and visible sign of the human tail has disappeared, the human embryo supplies proofs that man's remote ancestors possessed one. The remnants of this, a few small vertebræ beneath the skin, are among the seventy and odd vestigial structures ; "a large museum of relics which he carries about with him, enigmatical except in the light of the past." ¹ Scarcely less significant were Monboddo's speculations on the origin of civilization. It lies to his credit that in 1766 he could express the conviction that "there is a progression of our species from a state little better than mere brutality to that most perfect state you [this to a correspondent, James Harris] describe in ancient Greece." ² He would have read with pleasure

The Bible of Nature, by J. A. Thomson, p. 190. ² Knight, p. 50.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

the confirming words of Sir Henry Maine that “nothing moves in the modern world which is not Greek in origin.”

If Monboddo was ahead of his time, Johnson remained barely abreast of it; and small blame to him. Boswell says: “We talked of antiquarian researches. JOHNSON: ‘All that is really *known* of the ancient state of Britain is contained in a few pages. We *can* know no more than what the old writers have told us; yet what large books have we upon it,’ ”¹ the whole of which, excepting such parts as are taken from those old writers, is all a dream—such as Whitaker’s *Manchester*, of which book Horace Walpole said that it “seemed rather an account of Babel than Manchester, I mean in point of antiquity.”² And what applied to Britain applied *a fortiori* to the world at large. Holy writ, it was believed, contained all that could suffice man to know about his origin and history. On that and on much else, the canon was closed. Archbishop Ussher, who “flourished” in the seventeenth century, had computed—and his computation remained unchallenged down to the latter half of the nineteenth century—that the world was created 4004 B.C. Dr Lightfoot, Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, went one better in his computation that man was created by the Trinity on 23rd October 4004 B.C., at 9 a.m.³ But

¹ Vol. iii. p. 333.

² Vol. ix. p. 189, Toynbee’s edition.

He was not the first computer. Our late brother, Sir George H. Radford, sends me the following quotation from *Elucidarius Theologic*,

he must yield the palm to one Fisher, a "Marrow-man," who in his *Marrow of Divinity* proved to his own satisfaction "that Adam, after he had slain animals for clothing, offered them in sacrifice as a type of Christ, and was saved because he believed in Christ at exactly three p.m." ¹

One of the most remarkable men of Johnson's time was David Hartley, who was born in 1705 and died in 1757. As said at the outset, his name does not occur in Boswell's *Life*, and in a letter to Richard Price, Monboddo writes : "The only man from whom he [Dr. Priestley] professes to have learnt his Metaphysics is one Dr. Hartley, of whom I never heard so much as the name till I was last in London." ² A succinct outline of Hartley's philosophical work is given in Sir Leslie Stephen's *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* ³ ; here it must suffice to say that his fame, or what little is left of it, rests on his *Observations on Man*, published in 1749. Reference is made to it here only as evidencing how a foremost man of science of the mid-eighteenth century was bound by tradition and what was believed to be Revelation. His acceptance of the current chronology satisfied him that the shortness of the time which has

impressum Landesutenser, 1514, p. 6 : "*Discipulus. Quam diu fuit [Adam] in Paradiso? Magister. Septem horas. Dis. Cur non diutius? Mag. Quia mox ut mulier fuit creata confestim etiam prævaricata est.*"

¹ Graham, *Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. ii. p. 88.

² Knight, p. 126.

³ Vol. ii, pp. 63-68.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

elapsed since the Flood convinced him that both language and writing were due to direct miraculous agency. Talking of the origin of language, Johnson said that "it must have come by inspiration."¹ Neither he nor Hartley, nor the rest of them, Monboddo included, could detect in the love-calls and danger-cries of animals, and in the sounds of Nature, the raw material of articulate speech, the location of whose motor-centre in the human brain is one among the many discoveries of modern physiology. Neither did they know that there had been lying in the Sloane Collection, since the end of the seventeenth century, a rudely chipped, spear-shaped flint which had been unearthed in association with an elephant's tooth from the soil "opposite to black Mary's, near Grayes inn lane." That flint weapon epitomized the story of Man of the Ancient Stone Age, when he and a group of strange, and now long extinct, animals inhabited the valley of the Thames in a dim and dateless past.

The last subject of man's curiosity and inquiry is man himself. In his *Lectures on the Natural History of Man*, published in 1819, a work whose author was refused an injunction to protect his rights by Lord Eldon on the ground that it contradicted the Scriptures, Sir William Lawrence commented on Monboddo's theory "that man and the ourang-outang are proved to be of the same species, being no otherwise distinguished from each other than by

¹ Vol. iv. p. 207.

circumstances which can be accounted for by the different physical and moral agencies to which they have been exposed." He says: "A poor compliment to our species, as any one will think, who may take the trouble of paying a morning visit to the ourang-outang at Exeter Change."¹ In his *Memories of My Life* the late Sir Francis Galton says that "the subject of prehistoric civilization was novel even as late as the early fifties (i.e. of the nineteenth century) . . . the horizon of the antiquarians was so narrow at the date of my Cambridge days that the whole history of the early world was literally believed, by many of the best-informed men, to be contained in the Pentateuch. It was also practically supposed that nothing more of importance could be learnt of the origins of civilization during classical times than was to be found definitely stated in classical authors."²

Twenty years passed before anthropologists would accept, as artificially shaped, a number of chipped flints which had been found by a French savant, M. Boucher de Perthes, in 1839, in hitherto undisturbed river deposits which were being worked for sand and gravel in the valley of the Somme—destined to become the scene of one of the fiercest struggles that history can record. That acceptance dates from the year of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, on the last page of which he ventured only to hint that the theory of natural selection would "throw light on the origin of man and his history."

¹ P. 110, edition 1828.

² P. 66.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

In his *Descent of Man*, published in 1871, he explained that his reticence in 1859 was due to a desire "not to add to the prejudice against his views." It is true that Huxley, in his *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, published in 1863, had pushed the theory of organic evolution to its logical issue in including man, psychically as well as physically, in its processes. But, as showing how high feeling ran, Huxley told me that that book was one "that a very shrewd friend of his implored him not to publish, as it would certainly ruin all his prospects."¹ The friend was Sir William Lawrence, to whom reference was made above.

Thus, by slow degrees, has there been acceptance of the method applied to the study of origins generally to the study of the origin and history of man. No longer does he remain outside the organic kingdom; he is a part of the unbroken whole of the universal order. It may be asked, What has this recital of the history of the abandonment of the anthropocentric attitude, to which many still cling, to do with Johnson and Monboddo? Well, it is submitted as a justification of Johnson's attitude towards a theory which was opposed to the then current traditions—a theory, in fact, controverting the fundamental tenets of Christianity. He could only say of this what he said of the happiness of the savage life: "Sir, let me have no more on't." But that attitude should convey the lesson to keep an open mind towards all matters, especially those

¹ See Huxley, *Life and Letters*, vol. ii. p. 344.

DR. JOHNSON AND LORD MONBODDO

that collide with our prejudices and contradict our "certainties." A wise Frenchman said, "Because science is sure of nothing, it is always advancing."

Published fifty-five years ago in an anonymous volume entitled *Songs and Verses, Social and Scientific*, known afterwards to have been from the witty pen of Lord Neaves, there may for some readers be novel amusement in this tail-piece to a paper which has dealt with caudal appendages.

THE MEMORY OF MONBODDO

"Tis strange how men and things revive,
Though laid beneath the sod, O!
I sometimes think I see alive
Our good old friend Monboddo!
His views when forth at first they came,
Appeared a little odd, O!
But now we've notions much the same;
We're back to old Monboddo.

The rise of Man he loved to trace
Up to the very pod, O!
And in Baboons our parent race
Was found by old Monboddo.
Their A B C he made them speak,
And learn their Qui, quæ, quod, O!
Till Hebrew, Latin, Welsh, and Greek
They knew as well 's Monboddo.

The thought that men had once had tails
Caused many a grin full broad, O!
And why in us that feature fails,
Was asked of old Monboddo.
He showed that sitting on the rump,
While at our work we plod, O!
Would wear th' appendage to the stump
As close as in Monboddo.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Alas ! the good lord little knew,
As this strange ground he trod, O !
That others would his path pursue,
And never name Monboddo !
Such folks should have their tails restored,
And thereon feel the rod, O !
For having thus the fame ignored
That's due to old Monboddo.

Though Darwin now proclaims the law,
And spread it far abroad, O !
The man that first the secret saw
Was honest old Monboddo.
The Architect precedence takes
Of him that bears the hod, O !
So up and at them, Land of Cakes,
We'll vindicate Monboddo.

The Scotchman who would grudge his praise,
Must be a senseless clod, O !
A Monument then let us raise,
'To honour old Monboddo.
Let some great artist sketch the plan,
While Rogers ¹ gives the nod, O !
A Monkey changing to a man !
In memory of Monboddo.

¹ The Rev. promoter of the Wallace Monument, September 1861.

DR. JOHNSON ON LIBERTY

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,
3RD JULY 1918,

BY

E. S. P. HAYNES



Dr. Johnson on Liberty



I INTEND to exclude from this little paper any allusion to the subject of freewill and to confine the discussion to Dr. Johnson's views on political and individual Liberty. Liberty has always been (like most British ideals) a negative ideal ; but it does stand for a certain belief in allowing every community or individual to follow a certain sense of function or vocation, for a belief in the virtues of spontaneity as opposed to external control, and in the adaptability of public and private virtues to public and private emergencies. And this is a characteristically British ideal on which reposes the solid fabric of the British Empire. Its complement is the characteristically British distaste for flatulent verbiage and catchwords. When we profess a respect for "Liberty of Thought," what we really respect is *thought* itself, the freedom of expressing which is entirely dependent on protection from the freedom of a mob to suppress it.

In the recent pamphlet on *Religion and Civil Liberty* Mr. Belloc maintains that there "is an

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

implied injunction upon the authorities which govern the community that they should preserve not only its material structure but its character or soul. In proportion as this end is perfectly attained we speak of the community as *politically* free, although the restraints to which the members of it are put by the common authority may be very severe," as, for instance, in time of war. He argues that in normal times *individual* Liberty should not be restricted beyond the limit which is necessary to the "material structure or character of the State."

Mr. Belloc's pamphlet is intended to show that the recent extension of facilities for endowing anti-Christian Societies points not so much to a zeal for Liberty itself as to a change of religion in England. This change also seems to involve greater restriction by the State of liberty to publish a novel like *Tom Jones* or to drink beer. I have mentioned his definition in order to show how difficult it is to define Liberty and the different types of enthusiasm which the word creates in different persons.

Of course Dr. Johnson lived in an age when the Liberty cry was associated with mob violence. Men like Mr. Bernard Shaw attribute the loss of Liberty in the nineteenth century to the creation by Sir Robert Peel of an efficient police force. But our ancestors of the eighteenth century did not at all relish the unmitigated violence of the unrestrained mob either under John Wilkes or Lord George Gordon. A mob which did not like a new play would think

DR. JOHNSON ON LIBERTY

nothing of wrecking the theatre without any respect for the comfort or security of the more orderly playgoers. A cursory acquaintance with Wilkes's biography will make the modern reader understand the terror of mobs which only vanished after the failure of the Chartist riots in 1848.

Dr. Johnson fully shared this aversion from mob violence except perhaps at a safe distance. Boswell's account of his sympathetic attitude to negro insurrections is worth quoting on this point :—" After supper I accompanied him to his apartment and at my request he dictated to me an argument in favour of the negro who was then claiming his liberty, in an action in the court of Session in Scotland.

" He had always been very zealous against slavery in every form, in which I with all deference thought he discovered a 'zeal without knowledge.'

" Upon one occasion when in company with some very grave men at Oxford his toast was, ' Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies.' His violent prejudice against our West Indian and American settlers appeared whenever there was an opportunity. Towards the conclusion of his *Taxation no Tyranny* he says, ' How is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes ? ' and in his conversation with Mr. Wilkes he asked, ' Where did Beckford and Trecothick learn English ? ' "

Dr. Johnson considered that all free discussion tended to promote a breach of the peace. All strong

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

emotion on a subject was likely to produce incivility and as he said to Mr. Fitzherbert :—"Sir, a man has no more right to say an uncivil thing, than to act one ; no more right to say a rude thing to another than to knock him down." In fact physical force becomes the measure of Liberty. "In short, Sir, I have got no further than this ; every man has a right to utter what he thinks truth, and every other man has the right to knock him down for it. Martyrdom is the test."

It is impossible, as he says to Murray, to dispute serious matters with good humour. Dr. Johnson says to him, "Sir, they disputed with good humour because they were not in earnest about religion. Had the ancients been serious in their beliefs we should not have had their gods exhibited in the manner we find them represented in the poets. The people would not have suffered it. They disputed with good humour upon their fanciful theories, because they were not interested in the truth of them : when a man has nothing to lose he may be in a good humour with his opponent. Accordingly you see, in Lucian, the Epicurean who argues only negatively, keeps his temper ; the Stoic who has something positive to preserve, grows angry. Being angry with one who controverts an opinion which you value is a necessary consequence of the uneasiness you feel. Every man who attacks my belief diminishes in some degree my confidence in it. I am angry with him who makes me uneasy. Those only who believed in reve-

DR. JOHNSON ON LIBERTY

lation have been angry at having their faith called in question ; because they only had something upon which they could rest as matter of fact."

On the other hand Johnson disliked restraints on biographers as in the following remark : " Sir, it is of so much more consequence that truth should be told than that individuals should be made uneasy, that it is much better that the law does not restrain writing freely concerning the characters of the dead." The doctor apparently makes no allowance for the feelings of a father when the disgrace of a dead son is unnecessarily emphasized at the table or proclaimed to men who might otherwise never have been aware of the fact.

Generally speaking, however, his attitude is accurately defined by Boswell in the following passage : " ' Political liberty is good only in so far as it produces private liberty. Now, Sir, there is liberty of the Press, which you know is a constant topic. Suppose you and I and 200 more were restrained from printing our thoughts : what then ? What proportion would that restraint upon us bear to the private happiness of the nation ? ' "

He develops this theme a little further in his talk with Sir Adam Ferguson, whom he calls a " vile Whig " for suggesting that the Crown should have less power and the people more. He professes indifference to any form of Government. " In no government can power be abused for long. Mankind will not bear it. If a Sovereign oppresses his people to a great

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

degree they will rise to cut off his head. There is a remedy in human nature against tyranny that will keep us safe under every form of government. Had not the people of France thought themselves honoured in sharing in the brilliant actions of Louis XIV they would not have endured him, and we may say the same of the King of Prussia's people." The last sentence shows how astonishingly Dr. Johnson's opinion has been disproved by the enormously centralized power of the modern State in our day.

But Johnson was strongly opposed to any unreasonable destruction of Liberty as in the case of the small landholders who (he thought) "should not be deprived of the privilege of assessing themselves for making and repairing the high roads." These reservations not unnaturally seemed absurd to Wilkes, who used to remark: "What does he talk of Liberty? Liberty is as ridiculous in his mouth as Religion in mine."

There is, of course, one respect in which Dr. Johnson was violently opposed to modern ideas of Liberty. He might have shaken hands as a patriarch with J. S. Mill about negroes but never about women or their social rights. His remarks on the subject are too hackneyed to quote; but his references to performing animals and his explosive but pithy comment on Lady Diana Spencer's escape from an unhappy marriage are characteristic of his views. He was not (it is true) opposed to divorce as such—at any rate of a wife by a husband. He publicly censured an injured

DR. JOHNSON ON LIBERTY

husband who, he said, was "too sluggish to go to Parliament and get through "a divorce" which he could presumably afford. But he thought that no woman should have any existence apart from her husband ; she was to ignore her husband's infidelities, and if she emulated them, even without bringing strange progeny into the family, then she was "very fit for a brothel." Fornication, he thought, could be suppressed like theft. He said that he "would punish any sexual intercourse outside marriage much more severely and so restrain it." This was part of the Christian morality which nevertheless did not restrain his admiration of parliamentary divorce, and it was not on his part illogical ; for he would certainly have condemned any sexual intercourse which was designed to take place without the possibility of conception ; and this is, of course, the test of Christian teaching on this subject.

Such were the limitations of Dr. Johnson's views on Liberty. They were characteristic because they were sincere and practical and (for his time) humane. He is as quick to see that Liberty of thought when not expressed can never be restrained as that Liberty of discussion must be restrained when it will seriously disturb the King's peace. Many Englishmen are to-day severely disquieted in regard to Liberty, however indifferent they were to the suppression of Liberty before the war. And Dr. Johnson's views of Liberty are to some extent consoling. They go to the bedrock of the subject, and we may hope that he was right in

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

thinking that "there is a remedy in human nature against tyranny," and that this may even yet prove true of "the King of Prussia's people."

[NOTE.—This paper was read four months before "the King of Prussia's people found a remedy against human tyranny." "Liberty" is much on the lips of mankind throughout the world, and the word is as freely abused as ever, especially across the Atlantic. It is impossible to guess what the end of it all will be. Liberty is "the delicate fruit of a mature civilization," and civilization is disappearing from many parts of Europe. The Communist is certainly the hardest task-master of all.

In France and Great Britain alone there remains to-day something like a mature civilization which has survived the earthquakes of our time ; but the world is so much knit together in these days that local conditions are far less secure than they were even fifty years ago. The centralized machinery of the modern State makes for order ; but under new conditions it seems to be making for servitude. It is a pity that Dr. Johnson cannot come back to earth and give us some of his apophthegms on the notions of Liberty which are current to-day.]

DR. JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,

17TH OCTOBER 1917,

BY

SPENCER LEIGH HUGHES, M.P.



Dr. Johnson's Expletives



SAMUEL JOHNSON wrote and talked on many subjects, and it is chiefly though not entirely with his talk that I shall deal in this paper. By no means the least interesting of his talk was that about himself, as for instance when he claimed to be a good-humoured fellow, a very polite man, and “well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity.” As a proof of that he declared that he was cautious not to interrupt another, and also that he was attentive when others spoke. These will be recognized as valuable qualities by those who try to take part in conversation in a group of men, when there is nearly always one who will interrupt, or if he holds his peace while you are talking you will see at a glance that the fellow is not listening, but is muttering to himself his next remark so as not to forget it, and when it comes it has no reference to anything you have said. I am not sure that Johnson never interrupted, as when he roared down others—even ladies—but he generally listened, as was shown by his apt retorts. Indeed some people

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

may have found that he listened too keenly. But perhaps the best revelation of his own methods is to be found in his allusion to Jeremiah Markland, whom he allowed to be a scholar and then added, "but remember that he would run from the world, and that it is not the world's business to run after him. I hate a fellow whom pride, or cowardice, or laziness drives into a corner, and who does nothing when he is there but sit and growl ; let him come out as I do, and bark."

Johnson did some growling, though he did more barking, but it was not always or indeed generally savage or defiant barking. It was often the joyous uproar of an honest dog delighted to find himself in the company of other dogs, and eager to join in the give and take of the occasion. He never ran from the world either to induce the world to run after him, or for any other reason. What he said to James Macpherson may be regarded as his rule of life, "I hope I shall never be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian." It has been said that Boswell always reported faithfully the Doctor's onslaughts even when they were at Boswell's own expense. I am not sure of this. For instance, when Boswell persisted in talking about the fear of death, he records the fact that Johnson "was so provoked that he said, 'Give us no more of this,' and was thrown into such a state of agitation that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me ; showed an impatience that I should

DR. JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

leave him, and when I was going away called to me sternly, 'Don't let us meet to-morrow.' "

It is true that Johnson made it up the next day, but I should really like to know just what he said when he alarmed and distressed Boswell. That was one occasion on which the Doctor came out and barked with effect, for it looks as though the language had been for once "too hot," to use a phrase, for even Boswell to record. There may be many a remarkably strong phrase concealed beneath those words "showed an impatience that I should leave him."

It may be that in choosing the word "expletives" I have misled some and caused them to suppose I was going to say something about Johnson as a swearer. But Johnson was not a swearer. Is it not on record that he "was vehement against old Dr. Mounsey of Chelsea College as a fellow who swore and talked bawdy." Nor was this merely because Dr. Mounsey should have known better, for when a gentleman farmer used the phrase "damned fool" in his presence, Johnson in his retort introduced the word "damned" three times, with awful emphasis and frowning looks as a reproof. And when Boswell composed some little verse on marriage containing so harmless a phrase as "upon my soul," Johnson while praising the lines added, "But you should not swear." Yet it would be easy to maintain that Johnson used expletives in the original and perhaps the correct meaning of that word. Expletives are words (or may be syllables) used rather to fill out than add to the sense.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

° As that eminent man Dr. Isaac Barrow says in Sermon XV :

“The swearer will be forced to confess that his oaths are no more than waste and insignificant words, and that he useth them as expletive phrases to plump his speech and fill up sentences.”

Now the great man whose fame is dear to this Club did sometimes use words in order to plump his speech and fill up sentences, and such words are expletives whether they are profane or not. But I will confess that when I first selected this word I had in mind what Hannah More called “the asperities of our most revered and departed friend.” She wanted Boswell to “mitigate some o’ them,” and Boswell declined to clip his claws or to make a tiger a cat to please anybody. I suppose there is no book in the world more secure in its pride of place than Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, but as is the case with some people who grow up to enjoy long and vigorous life, it had serious risks in infancy. If Boswell’s son could have suppressed it he would have done so, and Hannah More was not the only person anxious to mitigate this, to tone down that, and to leave out something else. What a hash they would have made of it ! Boswell was fortunate in not being compelled to submit his work to any editor to be changed at will. Editors should have, and I am pleased to think will have, a hot time hereafter. You remember Charles Lamb’s outcry when Gifford of the *Quarterly* had hacked and altered Lamb’s essay on Wordsworth :

DR. JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

“The language has been altered throughout. Whatever inadequateness it had to its subject, it was in point of composition the prettiest piece of prose I ever writ. . . . Every warm expression is changed for a nasty cold one. . . . But that would have been little, putting his damned shoemaker phraseology (for he was a shoemaker) instead of mine, which has been tinctured with better authors than his ignorance can comprehend—for I reckon myself a dab at prose.”

John Morley, himself an editor of eminence, having quoted Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh* as saying that he freely struck out and occasionally wrote in when dealing with Carlyle adds, “The notion of Jeffrey occasionally writing elegantly into Carlyle’s proof-sheets is rather striking.” Boswell was spared all this. No doubt he consulted friends and sometimes took their advice, but he had no autocratic ruffian over him to maul and mutilate the book at will. So the “asperities,” as they were called, survive.

It is quite a mistake to suppose that Johnson when talking was nearly always in an overbearing mood. Again and again, Boswell records the fact that Johnson was in a placid or complacent mood and that they had much talk of an affectionate and even tender nature, but the talk is seldom reported. The fact is such talk is not remembered so certainly as the other sort. If we spend some hours in listening to talk when many benevolent things are said, and some half a score of triumphant retorts, keen criticisms, or truly

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

humorous remarks are heard, we are not likely to remember the benevolent things. Moreover in the case of Johnson I hold that many of the things which some people regard as asperities are nothing of the sort. Take, for example, his condensed yet compendious character sketch of Bet Flint "generally slut and drunkard, occasionally whore and thief." If you put the question baldly, "Is it not rather a pointed remark to say of a woman that she is a slut, a drunkard, a whore, and a thief?" I suppose something may be said for the contention. But I maintain there was no asperity involved. It was rather of the nature of a genial reminiscence, and the real text to apply is this—does the little snapshot of the lady cause us to dislike her? Each man must answer for himself, but so far as I am concerned I would rather have met Bet Flint than Hannah More.

As we all know, Johnson was very quick in retort, or as Boswell puts it, "punishment followed quick after sentence," and in this way he floored many a victim. But there may be less real asperity in these sudden flows than in biding one's time, and Johnson could do that occasionally. Thus when some "speculatist" bored Johnson by arguing in favour of the future life of dogs and other brutes, it is on record that Johnson, "being offended at its continuation, watched an opportunity to give the gentleman a blow of reprehension"—and I need hardly say that the gentleman got it before long, so that Johnson strode to the fire and stood for some time laughing

DR. JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

and exulting. I like that picture of the great man, watching an opportunity to give the gentleman a blow of reprehension. There is something at once grim and fascinating about it—the speculatist prattling on about the hereafter of dogs, and the Doctor breathing hard and preparing to pounce.

At one time I thought of drawing up a list of the names or epithets most commonly used by Johnson in oral controversy, and tabulating them so as to find out which was his favourite phrase. I have not carried this plan through, but had I done so I think “scoundrel” would have headed the list. And in addition to scoundrel he freely employed dog, rascal, blockhead, liar, idiot, fool, and dunce, and no doubt often employed them with good reason. But every one who knows anything of Johnson knows that while he sometimes used one or other of these words in grim earnest, he would at other times use the same word more or less playfully, or as Boswell records “smiling.” For instance, when at the “sorry inn” at Montrose the waiter put a lump of sugar with his fingers into Johnson’s lemonade, the Doctor exclaimed “Rascal,” but the word as then used does not mean so much as when “he was so much displeased with the performances of a nobleman’s French cook that he exclaimed with vehemence, ‘I’d throw such a rascal into the river.’”

Here he was in no playful mood, and it is significant that on the same page on which this honest outburst is recorded we have also his manly avowal,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

“For my part I mind my belly very studiously and very carefully.” And no one can doubt that when Johnson declared that Bolingbroke was “a scoundrel and a coward,” he meant what he said. We all remember that eventually he came to know Wilkes and to enjoy Jack’s conversation, but before that he said of Wilkes : “I think he is safe from the law, but he is an abusive scoundrel ; and instead of applying to my Lord Chief Justice to punish him, I would send half a dozen footmen and have him well ducked.”

Here again we have the ring of honest sincerity. So, too, when it was mentioned that Nabobs, or men who had made money in India, came home and bought seats in Parliament, Johnson was altogether for the man of family against such candidates, adding, “There is generally a scoundrelism about a low man.” As for the words “lie” and “liar,” he used them with great freedom as most of us do, but he would say that a man lied when he was honestly mistaken, reserving for some other offender the deeper condemnation “he lies and he knows he lies.” I like the case with which Johnson dismissed Hume’s contention that a man need not be more uneasy at thinking that he should “not be” after this life than that he “had not been” before he began to exist—“Sir,” said Johnson, “if he really thinks so he is mad ; if he does not think so he lies.” This is the old and convenient method, not unknown in the House of Commons, of holding that a man with whom you do not agree is either a fool or a liar, and may conceivably be both.

DR. JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

One of the most curious instances of Johnson's use of the word liar was when he said of some one unnamed by Boswell, but supposed to be the elder Sheridan :

“He is a good man, Sir, but he is a vain man and a liar. He, however, only tells lies of vanity ; of victories, for instance, in conversation which never happened.”

Here we have a recognition from the great moralist that one may be a good man and a liar at the same time—a recognition which some may find consolatory. One is reminded of the tribute paid to a Welsh preacher by his flock, “He has a great gift in prayer—but is a terrible liar.” And I may add that if all lies of vanity, especially lies about victories in conversation which never happened, are to be wiped off the account, the labours of the recording angel in book-keeping will be much reduced.

On another occasion when Goldsmith said that some one had advised him to go and hiss a play by Mrs. Lennox because she had attacked Shakespeare, the following conversation took place :

JOHNSON. And did you not tell him he was a rascal ?

GOLDSMITH. No, Sir, I did not. Perhaps he might not mean what he said.

JOHNSON. Nay, Sir, if he lied it is a different thing.

Colman slyly said (but it is believed Dr. Johnson did not hear him), “Then the proper expression should have been ‘Sir, if you don’t lie, you’re a rascal.’ ”

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

That was neat enough, but perhaps it was well for Colman if Johnson did not hear it.

I have never supposed when the Doctor was told that some one whom Sir Walter Scott supposes to have been named Pot, an ardent admirer, said that *Irene* was the finest tragedy of modern times, and Johnson replied, "If Pot says so, Pot lies," that the Doctor used the word in a savage sense at all. He had a way of putting an end to all dispute, as was shown when Boswell with much plausibility tried to defend some lady who had, after brutal ill-treatment, left her husband and attached herself to some one else, and Johnson summed up thus :

"My dear Sir, never accustom your mind to mingle virtue and vice. The woman's a whore, and there's an end on't."

There is an air of finality about that which defies argument. We know, too, how Foote conquered Johnson by mimicry, fun, and buffoonery, and so I have never seen severe condemnation in the Doctor's remark "Foote is quite impartial, for he tells lies of everybody."

And when told that Foote made fools of people at his dinner table—his own guests—Johnson remarked pleasantly : "Sir, he does not make fools of his company ; they whom he exposes are fools already ; he only brings them into action."

I suppose that Johnson used the word "dog" as an epithet with a greater range of meaning than any other word. There were times when he used it,

DR JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

especially in conjunction with that other term of reproach "Whig," with as grim earnestness as that of the Psalmist himself. But there was no unkindness in his tone when he addressed Boswell as a lazy dog, or even as a drunken dog—and who can ever forget his cheery salutation to Beauclerk and Langton, when they knocked him up at three in the morning—"What is it you, you dogs! I'll have a frisk with you." To have been called a dog by Johnson might have been a terrible experience, and it might have been an indication of intimate friendship.

There are some folk who know not Johnson who will tell you that his style was verbose and involved, but he was a great master of condensed criticism. Take for instance his description of Chesterfield's letters, "They teach the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master." Again there is the tone of a brief summing up about his reply to some worthy man who said Pope's *Dunciad* was too fine a poem for its subject, and asked incautiously, "a poem on what?"

JOHNSON (*with a disdainful look*). Why, on dunces. It was worth while being a dunce then. Ah, Sir, hadst thou lived in those days!

There is nothing involved or obscure about that. Quite apart from the disdainful look the meaning must have been clear to the victim, dunce though he may have been. I have sometimes wondered whether this gentleman was the same as one, also unnamed, who a little later is mentioned as arguing

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

in favour of a quack doctor's medicated baths at Chelsea. He urged that when warm water is "impregnated with salutiferous substances it may produce great effect." Now a man who talks about water being impregnated with salutiferous substances should have no mercy, and Johnson seemed to recognize this, for turning to the gentleman he said, "Well, Sir, go and get thyself fumigated, but be sure that the steam be directed to thy head, for that is the peccant part."

I doubt if ever before or since it was more plainly intimated to a man that he was a fool. I have already said that Johnson often used phrases that may appear strong and unfriendly, and yet as used by him they were nothing of the sort. To call a young poet a "whelp" may seem unfriendly, but when Johnson said of Chatterton, "It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things," it was just after he had declared that the young poet was "the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge," a tribute that might well have soothed

. . . the marvellous boy,
The sleepless soul that perished in his pride,

in his pauper's grave. And so when Johnson, visiting Plymouth, took the side of Plymouth against the Dockyard or New Town in a water-supply dispute and said of the inhabitants of the latter, "Rogues, let them die of thirst—they shall not have a drop," it was only his fun. Indeed it is on

DR JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

record that he was "half laughing at himself for his pretended zeal."

But even if we were to attach real and serious meaning to everything said by Johnson which some may regard as expletives or asperities, how mild his controversial style appears when compared with that of John Milton, sometimes described as "the lady of Christ's College, Cambridge." When some one produced an answer to Milton's views on Divorce, Milton, having first of all described the answer as "a jolly slander," used these phrases about the author in his answer : "A beast, a cockbrained solicitor, a low pudderer, a mere and arrant pettifogger, a pork who never read any philosophy, an unbuttoned fellow, a boar in a vineyard, a snout in pickle, an odious fool who leaves the noisome stench of his rude slot behind, a barbarian, the shame of all honest attorneys, an unswilled hogshead, a tradesman of the law whose best ware is only gibberish, a serving man and solicitor compounded into one mongrel, a superlative fool, an apostate scarecrow, a vagabond and ignoramus, a beetle, a daw, a horse-fly, a nuisance, and a brazen ass." And the list might be lengthened, for these are only some of the phrases used by Milton, not thrown off in the heat of talk, but published in a pamphlet which may be found to-day in the library of the House of Commons, and may possibly be of service to young and aspiring orators there. Johnson even when most aroused, when he was, as we are told, "puffing hard with passion struggling for a vent,"

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

and when he said "we have done with civility—we are to be as rude as we please," never rose, or sank, to Milton's level.

No one could show calm contempt as distinguished from vigorous attack more effectively than Johnson. A man might well prefer to be savagely denounced by Johnson rather than be dismissed as was Mr. Dudley Long: "He fills a chair. He is a man of genteel appearance, and that is all." Probably we all know some of those genteel chair-fillers, and his remark about an unnamed member of Parliament might be applied to many. The member had served on an election committee, and instead of listening to the facts had either read the paper or slept, excusing himself by saying that he had made up his mind on the case.

JOHNSON (*with indignant contempt*). If he was such a rogue as to make up his mind on a case without hearing it, he should not have been such a fool as to tell it.

It is to be feared that the practice of members making up their minds on cases in advance is not quite extinct. There is many a telling phrase to be found in Johnson's writings as well as in his talk. I have been reading again some of his tracts dealing with fireworks, with epitaphs, with the bravery of the English common soldier, with George III's coronation procession, and his spirited advocacy of semicircular arches as opposed to elliptical arches in Blackfriars Bridge, in which he must have confounded his opponent by beginning a reply in this way:

DR JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

“ It is the common fate of erroneous positions that they are betrayed by defence and obscured by explanation, that their authors deviate from the main question into incidental disquisitions and raise a mist where they should let in light.” That trick of deviating from the main question into incidental disquisitions and obscuring by explanation is not unknown at present. Much is said to-day about the state of things likely to prevail after the war. Journalists who write on this theme will do well to ponder over this extract from the *Idler* :

“ Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages. A peace will equally leave the warrior and relator of wars destitute of employment ; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with soldiers accustomed to plunder or from garrets filled with scribblers accustomed to lie.”

I have often thought that an essay could be written about unnamed people to whom an accidental allusion in a famous book brings what I may call anonymous immortality. Thus when Johnson was asked if any one could equal Garrick in declaiming the “ To be, or not to be ” soliloquy, he exclaimed : “ Anybody may. Jemmy there (a boy about eight years old, who was in the room) will do it as well in a week.” Who was Jemmy ? And was he listening, or could he imagine that people would be reading

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

about him a hundred and fifty years later. Then, who can forget this passage :

“ A gentlewoman [he said] begged I would give her my arm to assist her in crossing the street, which I accordingly did ; upon which she offered me a shilling, supposing me to be the watchman. I perceived that she was somewhat in liquor.” Who was this somewhat tipsy gentlewoman who thus strangely crosses the scene, and incidentally crosses the street leaning on the arm of him who was so often described by Boswell as “ the great lexicographer, the stately moralist, the masterly critic ? ” And now for the third unknown, who is really more closely connected with my theme. It is on record that when Johnson was ill in what proved to be his deathbed, a man whom he had never met before was employed to sit up with him. When asked how he liked his attendant, Johnson said, “ Not at all, Sir, the fellow’s an idcot ; he is as awkward as a turnspit when first put into the wheel, and as sleepy as a dormouse.”

We know nothing of this man other than this description, except that he was paid half a crown a night. He has, however, a strange interest for me as showing that the brave old Doctor could speak out right up to the end. This poor half-crown attendant was probably the last of a long succession of men who had been dismissed as fellows and idiots by Samuel Johnson. And yet the last words of this rugged old warrior of literature were a benediction. There

DR JOHNSON'S EXPLETIVES

is nothing more striking and touching, nothing finer, in literary history than the simple record of Johnson's end. He had fought a good fight, battling a long time with deep poverty and neglect, with disease and almost constant pain, with mental gloom and a dread of death amounting at times to horror. But when the end approached he faced it with calm courage, nay with serenity. And when in the hour, almost in the article, of death, Miss Morris, his particular friend's daughter, came to his room craving his blessing, we read "The Doctor turned himself in the bed and said, 'God bless you, my dear'"—and as Boswell adds, "These were the last words he spoke."

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB

BY

JOHN O'CONNOR, K.C., M.P.



Dr. Johnson and Ireland



NOTWITHSTANDING Dr. Johnson's well-known partiality for Irishmen, and his playful preference of the Irish Nation over the Scottish Nation, he never visited Ireland. He journeyed to the Hebrides, to France, and even to little Wales, but he could not be induced by Boswell to undertake a visit to Ireland. "It is the last place I should wish to travel," said he. "Should you not like to see Dublin, Sir?" asked Boswell. "No, Sir," he replied, "Dublin is only a worse capital." Boswell again asked, "Is not the Giant's Causeway worth seeing?" Johnson answered, "Worth seeing, yes, but not worth going to see."

His partiality for Irishmen may have begun with the man of that nation whom he early met at Birmingham, and who taught him how to live on 7d. per day, including a penny to the waitress—a little matter about which the Master was very particular—but, however that may be, his association with Irishmen was close at all times, often affectionate, always trusting and confidential, and it may, I think, be justly

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

claimed that in return he was well loved by Irishmen during his life, and his memory was well served by them after his death.

By way of example I shall first mention Arthur Murphy, of the Co. Roscommon, himself a prolific writer of plays—original and adapted—the editor of Fielding's Works, author of a *Life of Garrick*, an actor, a barrister-at-law, and a favourite of Society. It is evident that there was a strong mutual attachment between him and Dr. Johnson, for in Murphy's essay on the life and genius of Dr. Johnson, he tells us "he enjoyed the conversation and friendship of that excellent man more than thirty years. He thought it an honour to be so connected, and reflected on his loss with regret," and it would appear that the sentiment was returned by the Doctor, for the Rev. Dr. Maxwell, of Falkland, Ireland, whose collectanea is incorporated into the *Life* by Boswell, says: "Speaking of Arthur Murphy whom he (Dr. Johnson) very much loved [said he] I don't know that Arthur can be classed with the very first dramatic writers; yet at present I doubt much whether we have anything superior to Arthur"; and Mrs. Piozzi relates how the Doctor took a tragedy of Murphy's and laid it about the rooms, because he loved the author. This affectionate relationship did not end with the Master's death, but as the brethren know, was perpetuated in twelve volumes of his works, edited by Murphy and prefaced by the admirable essay to which I have referred.

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

Edmund Malone, who was a Co. Westmeath man (although born in Dublin), was one of Dr. Johnson's intimate friends. Himself a man of respectable talents, devoted to literary pursuits, with means and leisure to indulge his tastes, he soon found an introduction to Dr. Johnson. Malone rapidly gained admission to literary and political society. He gave and received hospitality. Visited Burke at Beaconsfield and Johnson at Bolt Court, and of course joined the Literary Club. Boswell, with whom he became cordially intimate, dedicated to Malone his "*Tour to the Hebrides*, to let the world know that I enjoy and honour the happiness of your friendship." During Dr. Johnson's life (1780) Malone published two substantial volumes supplementary to the Doctor's edition of Shakespeare. But close as the connection between the two men was during their lives, it was after the death of Dr. Johnson that Malone did his name and fame the greatest service. He helped Boswell with his first edition of the *Life*, and revised it with such skill that Boswell wrote: "I cannot sufficiently acknowledge my obligations to my friend, Mr. Malone, who was so good as to allow me to read to him almost the whole of my manuscript, and made such remarks as were greatly to the advantage of the work." He also edited, with notes, the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th editions of this, the greatest biography that was ever written. Malone brought not only literary accomplishments of a high order to the task, but an intimate knowledge

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

and a complete appreciation of the subject. In transmitting Henry Flood's sepulchral lines on Dr. Johnson, he wrote to Boswell: "Had he [Flood] undertaken to write an appropriate and discriminative epitaph for that excellent and extraordinary man . . . he would have produced one worthy of his illustrious subject." The lines being by a most distinguished Irish Statesman, patriot and orator, it will be appropriate to quote them :—

No need of Latin or of Greek to grace
Our Johnson's memory or inscribe his grave;
His native language claims this mournful space,
To pay the immortality he gave.

"His benevolence was unquestionable, and his countenance bore every trace of it. He was a very plain man, but had he been much more so, it was impossible not to love his goodness of heart, which broke out on every occasion. Nobody who knew him intimately could avoid admiring and loving his good qualities."

So wrote the "Jessamy Bride" of Oliver Goldsmith, and if his qualities were so apparent, it is not likely they would escape the observation of Dr. Johnson. There is no need in this company to dwell upon his affection for Goldsmith, nor upon the pathetic sale of the *Traveller* and the *Vicar of Wakefield*, which latter transaction not only freed the author from debt, but saved him from the alternative of marrying his far from alluring creditor. Dr. Johnson expressed himself in regard to Goldsmith's

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

shortcomings with freedom and said : " He talked always at random. It seemed to be his intention to blurt out whatever was in his mind, and see what would become of it. He was angry, too, when caught in an absurdity, but it did not prevent him from falling into another the next minute. They had at least one quarrel. ' Sir,' said Goldsmith, ' the gentleman has heard you patiently for an hour, pray allow us now to hear him.' JOHNSON (sternly). ' Sir, I was not interrupting the gentleman, I was only giving him a signal of my attention. Sir, you are impertinent.' " But it was a lovers' quarrel soon to be made up. That very evening at " The Club," in presence of Burke, Garrick, and others, " I'll make Goldsmith forgive me," said Johnson, and in a loud voice called out, " Dr. Goldsmith, something passed to-day where you and I dined, I ask your pardon." Goldsmith answered, " It must be much from you, Sir, that I take ill," and the little breeze blew over, and Boswell assures us they were on as easy terms as ever, and Goldsmith rattled away as usual. This little incident will best serve to show the terms of affection on which these two typical men of their respective nationalities stood. Johnson was full and complete in his appreciation of Goldsmith's abilities. He denied him the possession of much knowledge, but recognized his genius. Of the *Traveller* he wrote in the *Critical Review*, that " Since the death of Pope it will not be easy to find anything equal." Of the *Vicar of Wakefield* he

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

had not much hope, but defended *She Stoops to Conquer* against Horace Walpole's attacks, saying "he knew of no comedy for many years that has so much exhilarated an audience, that has answered so much the great end of comedy, making an audience merry," and so on to the end the strong Englishman was the staunch friend of the awkward little Irish doctor, whose faults he condoned during life and whose virtues he celebrated at death by the deathless epitaph in Westminster Abbey of the one

who left scarcely any kind of writing untouched and nothing that he touched did he not adorn.

Different indeed was Johnson's association with Burke. Here the great talker met his match, and for once came into friendly intercourse with one who was his rival, and perhaps his victor, in encyclopædic knowledge and power of expression. Like many intimacies of those days, that of Burke with the Master began at dinner. On Christmas Day, 1758, they met for the first time at Garrick's table, and Arthur Murphy, who was present, was surprised to find the lexicographer submit to contradiction from Burke, a man twenty years younger than himself, which Mruphy says, "he was not in the habit of tolerating from others, no matter how distinguished." The fact is, Burke, by sheer force of character, and by the possession of that quality which the Master recognized as most commanding—namely knowledge—compelled Johnson to admit his transcendent

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

abilities, his full information on almost all subjects, and his wonderful power of enforcing his views. The Master denied the possession of much information to Swift ; for Goldsmith's he had contempt, but he stood in awe before Burke's well-stored intellect, and consequently suffered himself to be contradicted by his newly found young acquaintance. He could live with Burke ; he said, "I love his knowledge." Talking about Burke with some friends in the Hebrides, he said as to Burke's particular excellence as regarded his eloquence that, "He had copiousness and fertility of allusion, a power of diversifying his matter by placing it in various relations. Burke has great information, and great command of language, though, in my opinion, it has not in every respect the highest elegance." "He has great knowledge, great fluency of words, and great promptness of ideas, so that he can speak with great illustration on any subject that comes before him." A frequent question to Arthur Murphy was, "Are you not proud of your fellow-countryman? *Cum talis sit utinam noster esset.*" A superb talker himself, he observed with admiration what he styled "Burke's affluence of conversation." Again, "Burke is an extraordinary man—his stream of mind is perpetual," and once when he was ill : "That fellow calls forth all my powers. Were I to see Burke now it would kill me." Such was his notion of him as an opponent in conversation. In return I am pleased to say that Burke held Johnson in the highest esteem, and when

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

the pension to the Doctor was opposed by the party to which Burke belonged, on the ground of Johnson's political principles, Burke warmly defended his friend, claiming that the pension had been granted on account of his eminent literary merit.

For some Irishmen Johnson had not the same kindly feelings. With Dictionary Sheridan he quarrelled, and for Swift he entertained a hatred. It may be he was influenced by the failure on the part of Earl Gower to move Swift through a friend to procure for Johnson an M.A. degree from the University of Dublin, when Johnson was a young man and looking for a mastership to secure which that degree was necessary. If it were so, Swift was wronged by Johnson. The former had no influence with the authorities of Trinity College. He was then and at all times on the very worst terms possible with them. The Irish Parliament was an adjunct of the College, and of them as the "Legion Club" he wrote :—

Half a bow-shot from the College,
Half the globe from sense and knowledge.

The effort failed. There is no evidence that the University of Dublin was ever asked, or that Swift was ever approached on the matter, and no blame can be attributed to the University or to Swift on that account.

And this brings me to an event which gives pleasure to all good Johnsonians and pride to every Irish scholar, and that is the conferring on the learned and

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

distinguished author the degree of LL.D. Twenty-six years after Dublin had been requested for a humbler degree, and ten years before Oxford followed its example, Trinity College, Dublin, did itself the high honour of recognizing the abilities and the work of Dr. Johnson by spontaneously bestowing upon him its greatest academical gift of Doctor of Laws. There has been some controversy as to his appreciation of the honour, but it is well known that he wrote a grateful letter of thanks on the occasion ; that Boswell says before he received the Oxford degree he had some difficulty in bringing himself to call him Doctor, and in Boswell's *Hebrides* he is commonly styled Doctor. We may well believe, therefore, that the Master was too just a man not to duly appreciate an honour from a college and University in the diploma of which the sacred words *Reginæ Elizabethæ* were mentioned.

In Irish learning Johnson took a deep interest, and once when Dr. T. Campbell (who came from Ireland specially to see him) ventured to say that the first Professors of Oxford, Paris, etc., were Irish, "Sir," said he in reply, "I believe there is something in what you say, and I am content with it since they are not Scotch." It is most interesting now to recall Dr. Johnson's view of Irish literature and language at a time of revival of both. Up to very recently a gradual decay of Irish learning and language had been going on for a considerable time. In 1757 the Master wrote to one Charles O'Connor, author

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

of a dissertation on the history of Ireland, soliciting him to prosecute his design, and stating that Sir William Temple complained that the ancient state of Ireland was less known than that of any other country, and added : “ I have long wished that the Irish literature were cultivated. Ireland is known by tradition to have been once the seat of piety and learning, and surely it would be very acceptable to all those who are curious on the origin of nations or the affinities of languages to be further informed of the revolution of a people so ancient and once so illustrious. I hope that you will continue to cultivate this kind of learning, which has too long been neglected and which, if it be suffered to remain in oblivion for another century, may perhaps never be retrieved.”

Well, the century and another half one had passed away by 1907, when the prediction had almost come true, the Irish literature had gone, and the Irish language was fast fading away. It lingered in the hills and by the sea coast. There its euphonious alliterative sound still mingled with mountain airs and sad sea breezes, but it seemed doomed. Still men (and women too) were thinking in Ireland as Dr. Johnson thought, and they determined that the language and literature and all other essential characteristics of the Gael should not die, but should be retrieved, and they have been successful to a considerable extent. I once endeavoured to express in the House of Commons the condition to which the language had been reduced. I hope the brethren will pardon my quoting from a

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

speech of my own :—" He had seen the language extinguished in two generations. He had known the older people to hold their conversation in it, to pray and to sing in it. He had seen their children, who understood but little of it and who never used it, and he had known the grandchildren whose ears were familiar with the soft sounds of the mother tongue, but whose minds were ignorant of the meaning of its words. In that way he had seen it recede from the centre to the sea, until one got possessed of the sad feeling that the day was not far distant when the last sound of the Irish language would be lost in the moan of the melancholy ocean."

But relief was at hand. My words were addressed to a sympathetic soul, and before the day was out an announcement was made by the Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant—our brother Birrell—that he had secured from the Treasury £40,000 a year for three years for the building and repairing of schools, and £13,000 per year for all time for the teaching of Irish in the schools and elsewhere. The ancient tongue, already arrested in its decay, was sent forward with a bound, and it is once again the vehicle of the thoughts of those whom the Master described as "a people so ancient and once so illustrious." Our brother Birrell has more than once since held up the "Treasury" and has compelled them with his strong hand and iron will to disgorge out of its rapacious maw large sums for education in Ireland, until every Institute of learning from top to bottom—from the

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

National University of his own creation to the humblest village school—feels the impulse of his generous and sympathetic devotion.

That Johnson should, as a “clubable” man, have shown a partiality for Irishmen, could be understood, as he believed they mixed with the English better than the Scotch do, their language being nearer to the English. That he should, as a philologist, yearn for the preservation of an ancient learning could be well appreciated, but that he should denounce the government of Ireland as wicked and indefensible is, at first sight, not so easily grasped. To those who try to understand Dr. Johnson’s mind it is clear that he was a just man, believing in just administration rather than in perfect legislation, and they will not wonder at his celebrated declaration :—

“Sir, the Irish are a most unnatural State, for we see there the minority prevailing over the majority. There is no instance even in the ten persecutions as that which the Protestants of Ireland have exercised against the Catholics. Did we tell them we had conquered them it would be above board to punish them by confiscation and other penalties as rebels was monstrous injustice.” The Rev. Dr. Maxwell relates that, to a gentleman who hinted such measures as the penal laws might be necessary to support English Government, he said : “Let the authority of the English Government perish rather than be maintained by iniquity.” His often quoted statement to another Irish gentleman, when a Union was

DR. JOHNSON AND IRELAND

talked of: "Do not unite with us. We should unite with you only to rob you. We should have robbed the Scotch if they had had anything of which we could have robbed them," shows his prescience and soundness as a political thinker, and his wisdom was thoroughly appreciated by his contemporaries, far and near. His acquaintance was sought by persons of the greatest eminence in literature and politics. It is, therefore, gratifying to find that one so distinguished gave his ungrudging sympathy to Ireland in her distress, and kept close to him in affectionate relationship the talented Irishmen whom he met. He was an honest and just man who did not allow petty things to warp his judgment, the foibles, envies and vanities of the persons he met did not affect his estimate of their merits. In a firmament made brilliant by the brightest stars, this keen observer had his eyes fixed on those of the first magnitude, and he had a full appreciation of their glory, and allowed no clouds of jealousy or prejudice to obscure his vision. For the kind regards he turned towards them, the people of old Ireland preserve his memory in the warmest corner of their hearts.

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,
13TH DECEMBER 1913,

BY

GEORGE RADFORD, M.P.



Johnson's Dictionary



It is, as the lawyers say, a conclusive and irrefutable presumption that every member of the Johnson Club is acquainted with all the Johnsonian works that have been edited by our Brother and immortal Prior, Birkbeck Hill. Our late Brother (on whom be peace !) gleaned so closely in his chosen field that very little has been left to gather by the writers who have followed him. That member, therefore, of the Johnson Club who dares to invite his Brethren to listen to a dissertation on a familiar subject cannot hope to allure them with the glitter of novelty. Nor can he, perhaps, who chooses Johnson's Dictionary as his theme expect to bestow on his pages that adornment which arises from dignity of subject or beauty of diction. All that is left to him is to marshal scattered facts and incidents, it may be imperfectly remembered, in such a way as to give them a semblance of novelty from their orderly presentment and a momentary interest from their historical concatenation. These preliminary observations are

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

designed to mitigate the disappointment of partial friendship and to blunt the barbs of critical malignity.

It was in the year 1747 that the Plan for a Dictionary of the English language was issued by the booksellers addressed to Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield. Johnson was thirty-eight years of age, and had been ten years in London, and sitting in his lodgings in Holborn he did not flatter himself that he had travelled far on the road to fame or fortune. He had published his translation of Father Lobo's *Abyssinia*, written various articles for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and composed for the same receptacle the Debates of the Senate of Lilliput. He had also published sketchy lives of Sir Francis Drake and several others, and a much more ample life of Richard Savage. In verse he had written *London*, for which he received £10 10s. and the praises of Alexander Pope, and also written *Irene*, but had not found a lessee with the courage to produce it on the stage.

Johnson's friends were few, and most of them were the booksellers from whom he earned his daily bread. I am not surprised that those who knew him best had most confidence in him, though it is perhaps remarkable that five substantial firms, Robert Dodsley, Charles Hitch, Andrew Millar, Longmans, and Knaptons should have been ready to risk their money in publishing a great English Dictionary dependent for its success on the capacity, learning, and industry of the then unaccredited hero, Samuel

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

Johnson. The Plan indicated the magnitude of the work proposed. Johnson was not only to marshal the whole language and to reject all words that were for any reason unworthy, but he was to supply all that a reasonable reader might require for the words admitted. The orthography, pronunciation, and accent were to be settled by Johnson's authority. He was also to give the true etymologies and the interpretations. Finally he was to quote passages from the best authors, showing the sense in which words were used by them.

The contract was dated (according to Sir John Hawkins)¹ the 18th June 1746, and the sum involved was considerable. Johnson was to receive £1,575, William Strahan's bill for printing is extant and amounts to £1,239 11s. 6d. The binding of those two great folio volumes in calf cost something, and there were doubtless other expenses. The time to be occupied in the work was to be three years, and though the time actually occupied was seven years, these provident booksellers were necessarily paying out money continually without return until the date of publication. Johnson was not unprepared for such a work, and had long had it in contemplation. His reading of English literature had begun in his father's bookshop at Lichfield, and had been miscellaneous and incessant. Years before 1747, Robert Dodsley had unsuccessfully proposed to him the compiling of a dictionary, and he had thought of it long before

¹ *The Story of a Printing House*. 2nd edition, 1912.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

that. Indeed it would seem that he had discussed the project with Pope, who died in 1744, for the Plan states that Pope had approved the list of authorities to be quoted, and was not unwilling that the work should be undertaken by Johnson. Ways and means having been provided, Johnson set vigorously to work, and employed a team of six amanuenses, one of whom, Peyton, was an Englishman and the remaining five were Scotsmen, the two Macbeans, Shiels, Stewart, and Maitland.

We do not know exactly when Johnson moved from Holborn to 17 Gough Square, Fleet Street, now happily owned by our Brother Cecil Harmsworth, but it was in this house that most, if not all, the work was done. A dated letter proves that Johnson was there on the 12th July 1749, and he remained there during the whole period of the production of the Dictionary.

William Strahan's dwelling-house and printing press were close by at 10 Little New Street, and thither the copy went daily, or with as much regularity as Johnson could command.

We learn something from Johnson's contemporaries as to the manner in which the work was done. Johnson selected the words, and used to fortify his memory the dictionaries of Bailey, Ainsworth, and Phillips, read a vast number of approved works, pencil in hand, and underlined the passages he meant to quote in the dictionary and marked in the margin the initial letter of the word to be illustrated by the

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

quotation. The books used in this manner were Johnson's own books (a large, but according to Sir John Hawkins, a ragged collection) and any others that he could borrow. The books so marked were handed to the six amanuenses, who sat in the large upper room at 17 Gough Square, fitted up as a counting house, and copied the word and the marked passages on to separate slips. Later Johnson dictated to the scribes the etymology of the word (mostly in case of what he calls the "Teutonical" roots from Junius or Skinner) and the definitions or interpretations, which were then written on to the slips between the words and the quotations, and the slips were then arranged in lexicographical order. This is the mechanism of dictionary making as practised by Johnson, and so the work went on week after week and month after month.

Went on, but not without cares and sorrows and not perhaps without inevitable interruptions. Pecuniary anxiety was not absent when it became apparent that the stipulated period of three years would be largely exceeded, and Johnson had occasion to practise that computation which he so strongly recommended to others. You are to consider that £1,575, though a considerable sum, appears to dwindle when seven persons, the lexicographer and six amanuenses, have to live on it. When £1,575 or 1,500 guineas is divided by seven the quotient is £225, and when the £225 be spread over seven years (as in fact it had to be) you find that the seven workers had on an

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

average rather less than £33 per head per annum. Johnson deserved, and no doubt had, the lion's share of the booksellers' bounty, but wages cannot fall below the point of subsistence, and even the lion in partnership must keep his partners alive. In such circumstance even the lion's share must be a slender one. Johnson wrote to Strahan : " I pay three and twenty shillings a week to my assistants," and urging him for more money, saying, " The point is to get two guineas." It would seem that at the date of this letter Johnson was contented to get nineteen shillings a week for himself. The money was necessarily advanced from time to time to keep Johnson and his team alive during the period of production, and William Strahan the printer was the booksellers' paymaster. There was the usual quarrel between Johnson and the printer caused by delay in delivery of copy, and relations were severely strained. It appears from a letter from Johnson to Strahan dated 1st November 1751, that the booksellers, " the Gentlemen Partners " as Johnson calls them, threatened to stop supplies, and that Johnson, unmoved by the threat of a blockade, threatened retaliation.

He uses the language of a sovereign potentate contemplating warfare : " Be pleased to lay this my determination before them (i.e. the gentlemen partners) this morning, for I shall think of taking my measures accordingly to-morrow evening, only this that I mean no harm, but that my citadel shall not be taken by storm while I can defend it, and that if a blockade

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

is intended the country is under the command of my batteries, I shall think of laying it under contribution to-morrow evening."

It is difficult to infer from this figurative language what precise measures Johnson contemplated, but he was clearly in a strong position. The first volume was hardly completed, and the gentlemen partners would have been landed in perhaps inextricable difficulty by the strike of their only employé. In these circumstances the dispute was somehow settled, probably on Johnson's terms, and Strahan appears to have behaved with good temper as well as prudence. A *modus vivendi* was arrived at for the future, pursuant to which the author was to receive a guinea for every sheet of MS. delivered. I need not remind the Brethren that each sheet comprised four pages of the great folio.

Johnson wrote to Strahan that if he would promise to print a sheet a day he, Johnson, would promise to endeavour that Strahan should have every day a sheet to print. This was probably more than could be performed on Johnson's, or perhaps on either side. But Johnson did not complain of the gentlemen partners. When Boswell once said to him, "I am sorry, Sir, that you did not get more for your Dictionary," his answer was: "I am sorry too. But it was very well. The booksellers were generous, liberal-minded men."

The Dictionary was not Johnson's only work during these years. He published the *Vanity of Human*

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Wishes in 1749, and got *Irene* acted by Garrick in the same year. In 1750-51 and 52 he was publishing the *Rambler* and writing nearly all of it. In 1753 he wrote for the *Adventurer* and in 1754 published the *Life of Cave* in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

The Preface, the History of the English Language, and the Grammar were not written till after the main work was finished, and then it became necessary to consider what was at that date a more important matter than it now is, viz. the Dedication. When the Plan was issued it was intended to dedicate the work to Lord Chesterfield, and the booksellers would have been glad if the original intention had been carried out. They would have approved a dedication to his Lordship or any other great man whose approbation might have favourably affected the sale. The booksellers had to acquiesce in Johnson's decision *not* to dedicate the Dictionary to Lord Chesterfield, and to dispense with a dedication altogether. It was in these circumstances that Johnson wrote the letter to Lord Chesterfield that soon became the talk of the town, though it was not published till thirty-five years afterwards, when Boswell published it with notes, in anticipation of his *Life*.

I will not here discuss the question of the rights and duties of author and patron, but content myself with reading the letter, like the Bible in certain Board-Schools, without note or comment :

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

*To the Right Honourable the Earl of Chesterfield.*¹

February 7, 1755.

MY LORD,

I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of the World, that two papers in which my Dictionary is recommended to the publick were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished, is an honour, which, being little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address; and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*; that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending, but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in publick, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

Seven years, my Lord, have now past, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a patron before.

The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks. Is not a patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary and cannot impart

¹ Published by Boswell in 1799, with Notes, 4to, 10s. 6d.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the Publick should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself. Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation,

My Lord,

Your Lordship's most humble,

Most obedient servant,

SAM. JOHNSON.

The long-delayed work was published on the 15th April 1755, in two volumes folio, and the full title was: "A Dictionary of the English Language in which the words are deduced from their originals and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed a history of the language and an English Grammar. By Samuel Johnson." The price was £4 10s., and if a purchaser complained, the honest bookseller could truthfully answer: "Sir, those fine volumes stand 17 inches high, and weigh not less than 27 lbs."

The edition was of 2,000 copies, and the sale was satisfactory. To Johnson this was of no pecuniary importance as he had been paid his agreed price (and according to Hawkins £100 more) before publication. It was gratifying to the gentlemen partners who had backed Johnson and waited more or less patiently for

the return of their outlay. They had reason to be glad. There was a second edition in the same year, and a third in 1765, a fourth revised by Johnson in 1773,¹ all in folio, and a fifth before his death. What was perhaps equally lucrative to them was the Abridgement in two volumes 8vo, of which Strahan had printed an edition of 5,000 in December 1755 and which was advertised in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for January 1756. There were certainly six, perhaps seven, editions of the Abridgement in Johnson's lifetime. This was the book which Johnson found in Lord Scarsdale's dressing-room at Kedleston in 1777, when he said to Boswell: "Quæ regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?" Let me say (parenthetically) that I treasure a pirated American edition of *Obiter Dicta*, 1885, which contains the same quotation from Virgil in the hand-writing of our Brother Birrell.

Long after (in 1779) when Boswell once said to Johnson in reference to the Dictionary, "You did not know what you were undertaking," Johnson replied: "Yes, Sir, I knew very well what I was undertaking—and very well how to do it—and have done it very well."

This appreciation by Johnson of his own work is just as well as generous. It was generally shared by his contemporaries including George III, and has been accepted by posterity. Of course there have been critics and fault-finders. Macaulay says that

¹ B.M. Catalogue of Printed Books.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Johnson was "a wretched etymologist." This statement, like some others of the same author, would be more true, though perhaps less effective, if it were qualified. With regard to the words derived directly or indirectly from the classical languages (and they are by far the larger number) he was *not* a wretched etymologist. On the contrary, he was, to put his claims modestly, competent, and few men of his day were better. With regard to what he called the *Teutonic* words he made no pretensions to knowledge or originality, but accepted the precept *Experto crede*, and relied on the authority of Skinner or Junius. He says very frankly in his preface : "The etymology which I adopt is uncertain, and perhaps frequently erroneous." It is, by the way, a saddening reflection on the vanity of human industry that we find again and again in the New English Dictionary after Sir James Murray's forty years of labour, at the head of countless philologists and searchers after truth, the dismal words "etymology uncertain" and "derivation unknown."

The principal merit of the work perhaps lies in the definitions. "Words," says Johnson, "are the signs of ideas," and he pondered over the ideas in order to define the words. We may, I think, adopt Boswell's opinion : "The definitions have always appeared to me such astonishing proofs of acuteness of intellect and precision of language as to indicate a genius of the highest order."

To define an ordinary word of abstract significance

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

requires thought, and brings into play the memory, as well as the faculty which bodies forth the forms of things, and that other faculty which detects similarities and resemblances. The same word has many senses which have to be distinguished as well as defined. In the slow routine of the alphabet you encounter words which are identical, or similar, or otherwise related to words already defined. You are thus necessarily brought to reconsider your first definition, and very likely to correct and recast it. Who knows how much of the £132 11s. paid by the booksellers to Strahan for "alterations and additions" was due to this recasting by Johnson of his first definitions in the light of later ones. It is true that he sometimes failed to carry out this process. The definition of *cockloft* as the room over the garret "remains apparently inconsistent with the later definition of *garret* as 'a room on the highest floor.'" But I believe there are very few of such cases to be alleged, and Boswell's admiration for the definition is well-founded. But like Macaulay's observation it requires to be qualified. His definitions are sometimes inadequate, as, e.g. when he defines *groundsel* as "a plant." But let us remember that when he was asked in a garden in Devonshire whether he was a botanist, he replied: "No, Sir, I am not a botanist; and" (alluding no doubt to his near-sightedness) "should I wish to become a botanist, I must first turn myself into a reptile."

If Johnson did not make much money out of the

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Dictionary, and was a poor man after it was published, he certainly increased his reputation and consequently his personal influence and his earning power. When in 1762 he received his pension from the Crown of £300 a year on the recommendation of Lord Bute it was as a reward for literary merit, and not for services rendered to the Government. It may well be questioned whether but for the Dictionary his literary merit would have been so well known as to be thus rewarded. The Dictionary probably brought to its author, in one way and another, a great deal more money than the booksellers paid him.

Apart from the pecuniary return the sustained labours of the lexicographer had profound effects on his style and on his mind.

The effect on his style was not altogether happy. He was daily recording, defining, and deducing from their originals legions of words, necessarily unusual, for words are many though the vocabulary of the typical Englishman is extremely small. Since he was thus flush of energetic and unusual words (as Boswell calls them) it seemed a pity to waste them, and he poured them twice a week into the *Rambler*, which came out every Tuesday and Saturday for two whole years of the time during which Johnson was at work as a practising lexicographer. This profusion cannot altogether be justified. It is the business of a lexicographer to know all words ; it is that of a man of letters to select the best. Archibald Campbell, who made a voyage to Florida with no

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

literature on board except the *Ramblers*, was driven to fury by Johnson's style, and published a book in March 1767 under the title of *Lexiphanes* (an imitation of Lucian), in which he denounces Johnson as one who spoils the language and corrupts the taste of a rich and famous people—and so forth—and charges him with being mighty fond of long-tailed, wormlike words, which he had imported from the Greek and Latin, finding an insufficient stock of them in our own language. There is something in Campbell's criticism of Johnson's language (as distinguished from his style, with which I am not now concerned), and he has attained a sort of tenuous immortality by his attack on Johnson. But the attack was exaggerated, and the effect on Johnson's style was temporary. By the time he wrote the lives of the poets he had recovered from the mechanical effects of dictionary making: his vocabulary was then copious and adequate for any undertaking, but was not overburdened with classical terminology.

There was another trivial effect which Johnson himself confesses to Mrs. Thrale, to whom he wrote impromptu verses on her thirty-fifth birthday (1776) and afterwards pointed out to her that all the rhymes were in alphabetical order, beginning with "Oft in danger yet *alive*" and ending with "Those who wisely wish to *wive*, Must look at Thrale at thirty-five." This is a trifle and might be compared with equally characteristic trifles produced by the routine of other professions.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

How far did Johnson succeed in his attempt "to fix the English language" and "to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom?" With regard to orthography his success was, if not complete, very considerable, and he may be said to have been the principal influence in standardizing spelling.

With regard to pronunciation, his effect has been much smaller. It was imperfectly understood by Johnson that the spoken language is the substance of which the written is only the shadow, and that the living spoken language cannot and ought not to be fixed, but changes according to laws which were unknown to him. Phonetic debilitation is in constant progress, and it will be a short time (geologically speaking) before the spoken word and the written word will be so dissimilar as only to be connected by the research of diligent students.

The stress-accent on words changes by the same natural laws, and the endeavour to fix them was futile. *Balcóny* has become *bálcony*, *melanchóly* has become *mélancholy*, *révenue* has become *révenue*, *decórous* has become *décorous*, and *illústrate* has become *illustrate*, notwithstanding Johnson's decree to accentuate the penultimate. So *comméndable* has become *cómmendable*, *contémpilate* has become *cóntemplate*, *chastísement* has become *chástisement*, and the stress-accent on other words is always receding.

But Johnson was attempting to fix not only the spelling, pronunciation, and stress-accent of words. He actually intended to fix also the meaning. This was perhaps the most futile of his efforts. It is the

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

world, all complaints of which Johnson says are unjust, that determines and from time to time alters the signification of the language it uses, and meaning changes as well as sound. A striking example of such change, and of Johnson's failure to arrest it, is found in the word *ascertain* in the passage already quoted. Johnson defines ascertain, as to make certain; to fix; to establish; to make confident; to take away any doubt. And when he spoke in his preface of *ascertaining* the meaning of our English idiom as his chief intent, he certainly meant to establish, and then to fix the meaning. It was in this sense that the word was used by Dean Swift in 1712 in his proposal for correcting, improving, and *ascertaining* the English Tongue; but, we do not now use the word, and have not for half a century used it, in this sense. The New Oxford Dictionary, after defining several senses in which the word has been used, gives this definition: "To find out for a certainty by experiment, examination, or investigation"; and adds that this is *the only current use* of the word *ascertain*.

Returning to Johnson, the Dictionary compelled him (indolent as he said he was) to go through a very large and varied course of careful reading. If any Brother doubts this let him read the authorities on a single page of the folio taken anywhere at random. Johnson confesses that he first read Bacon for the purpose of the Dictionary.

Accepting Johnson's definition that a lexicographer is a harmless drudge who busies himself in tracing

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

the original and detailing the significance of words, a mind admittedly vigorous, trained for seven years in this process of research and ratiocination, emerged well stored with all the knowledge extant in our language, and ready in all forms and arts of expression.

The man who met Johnson in conversation or controversy found an intellect here not idle or out of condition, but trained by the process of meditating over the meaning of words and giving to it accurate and unambiguous expression.

This it was that made Johnson supreme in conversation and invincible in argument. There were men in the eighteenth century who excelled Johnson in mental vigour or in scholarship; there were, perhaps, men equal to him in general knowledge, perhaps in verbal memory, it may be in imagination or in humour; but there was no man possessing one or combining several of these gifts who had given several years of his life to meditating the meaning of all the words in the language and defining it in clear and intelligible terms.

It has been said that Johnson owes his reputation not to his works, but to his conversation. It may perhaps be asserted with equal truth that but for the learning acquired and the mental training endured in producing the Dictionary, he would not have been the conversationalist he was. He would never have been the Dictator of the Republic of Letters, he would not have attracted to him all the best spirits of the age, he would not have attracted Boswell,

JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

and would thus have lost the best biographer these realms have produced. Indeed, if he had not inspired the confidence of Dodsley and his fellows, if he had not made his great voyage of the English Language, if he had not manfully laboured through it, often in sorrow and sickness, and come into port triumphant, it is doubtful whether he would ever have attained the secure place he holds among the Immortals.

DR. JOHNSON AND THE LAW

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB

BY

E. S. ROSCOE



Dr. Johnson and the Law



IT is surprising that the importance of the law as an element in Dr. Johnson's life has not hitherto been carefully estimated. The following pages attempt the necessary appreciation.

In popular parlance, when people speak of the law they mean not only jurisprudence and legal procedure, but the personal machinery of justice as well as the body of legal practitioners. It is this popular phraseology which is used in reference to Dr. Johnson and the law.

First of all it is desirable to state Dr. Johnson's own point of view in relation to himself and the law. "Sir," he once said, "it would have been better that I had been of a profession. I ought to have been a lawyer." Here is a clear indication of Johnson's own opinion. To what extent was this view supported by others? A well-qualified observer, himself an eminent judge—Lord Stowell—said to Dr. Johnson, "What a pity it is, Sir, that you did not follow the profession of the law. You might have been Lord

Chancellor." These latter words contain a safe piece of flattery, but the statement apart from them, is full of interest, for Stowell was too true a friend of Johnson, too shrewd an observer, to make a heedless remark on this subject. Johnson then, according to his own opinion, should have been a lawyer, which suggests that he had an accurate knowledge of his own abilities, as well as, on the other hand, a clear perception of the necessary attributes of an advocate. The statement of Lord Stowell in corroboration of Johnson's own view has been referred to. Boswell himself, and Dr. Adams, the head of Pembroke College, Oxford, might also be cited as men who held the same opinion as Lord Stowell.

How far then were these opinions well founded? In the first place Johnson pre-eminently possessed qualities required in a successful legal adviser and advocate, especially a robust and logical intellect, averse to subtlety. The late Lord Esher, at one time Master of the Rolls, used sometimes to say to a specially ingenious counsel, "Come, come, that is too fine." This judicial criticism would certainly never have been applied to any argument of Johnson's. Especially remarkable also was his gift of inherent perception of the crucial fact in a set of circumstances, a quality which may be enlarged by practice, but which appears to be absent from the minds of many laymen as well as lawyers. And also he was endowed with a power of clear expression and a copious and resonant vocabulary united with a capacity of statement

DR. JOHNSON AND THE LAW

in popular and forcible language. Perhaps an equally valuable quality was a power of a quickly kindled argumentative warmth, which, had he been an advocate, would have enabled him to envelop the case of his clients with an atmosphere of fervid—if temporary—indignation. Again the attractive common sense of his words was so willingly received he convinces me, but he never fails to show me that by a hearer that the argument was apprehended without effort. Lord Elibank, who was a man of the world and a man of ability, once said to Boswell, “Whatever opinion Johnson maintains I will not say that he convinces me, but he never fails to show me that he has good reason for it.” If we take Lord Elibank to represent an intelligent jurymen, or even an attentive judge, obviously Johnson as an advocate had gone a long way to win his case, and if we imagine the Doctor pitted against some one inferior to himself in the qualities already stated, in imagination one sees him in full career as a successful barrister. The qualities of inherent perception and clear statement have been the basic causes of success of every first-rate advocate. They have been in many cases the main cause, and the reason why the success of this or that counsel, who superficially seems to be without striking attributes, has appeared strange to those who have not been careful observers, is simply that they have never appreciated this fact. On the other hand, eloquent advocates would never have attained their remarkable positions if they had had eloquence

alone. They have all possessed an eye to main facts, varying no doubt in acuteness.

Again, Johnson's habit of argument was largely the spontaneous application of these special talents to intercourse in daily society. Why did he like Thurlow and call him a "fine fellow"? Because "he fairly puts his mind to yours." Because, in fact, he was a close and forcible arguer. Are we too imaginative if we surmise that the arguments between the man of letters and the lawyer were often on legal subjects? If they were we have a glimpse of these verbal combats from what Cradock in his *Memoirs* says of the two disputants: "I was always more afraid of Johnson than of Thurlow; for though the latter was sometimes very rough and coarse, yet the decisive stroke of the former left a mortal wound behind it." In this passage the writer does not seem to describe an argument between the Doctor and the Judge, but rather one with himself, but the description fits an encounter when the two remarkable minds were, in Johnson's phrase, "put" to each other.

If Johnson had gone to the Bar and had spent his days in writing opinions and in arguing cases in Court, or later in deciding them on the Bench, it is possible that, having exhausted his powers in professional work, he would never have used them to delight or confound his friends, or at least not to anything like the extent he did. It was, however, primarily the possession of these qualities which caused Johnson to direct his mind to and enjoy the discussion of legal

DR. JOHNSON AND THE LAW

questions and to appreciate the society of lawyers. In support of this point is the fact that at least on four occasions Johnson wrote a legal argument. The first was on a question of Scots law as to the right of a person to intermeddle without legal authority with the effects of a deceased person. The legal point does not matter. Boswell says that he had exhausted all his own powers of reasoning in vain, and then come these significant words: "In order to assist me in my application to the Court for a revision and alteration of the judgment, he dictated to me the following argument." I won't inflict it on those listening to me. But I may also remind you that at a later date when Boswell was Counsel in an election petition he stated different points to Johnson, who, he says, "never failed to see them clearly and to give me some good hints." The arguments which Johnson wrote have been called by an unfriendly critic—a barrister—"very admirable and masterly and worthy the attention of the student." The expression is valuable from this writer, because not only is it about the only good thing that the author can say for Johnson, but it is the evidence of a person learned in the law who seems to have carefully studied from the point of view of a lawyer what Johnson said and the nature of his character, and actually recommends to the law student the perusal of the legal arguments of the man of letters. These examples and others which may be found in Boswell's book, prove, I think, incontestably the legal character of

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Johnson's mind as well as a natural inclination to apply it to practical points of law. Indeed, is there a layman in existence who would or could sit down to dictate to a lawyer a legal argument of point and substance, unless he had a mind singularly adapted to this purpose and had studied and reflected on principles of law and on legal decisions?

There can be little doubt that the law was in Johnson's mind for the best part of his life. In 1776, when he was sixty-seven, he said to Boswell, "I learnt what I know of law chiefly from Mr. Ballow, a very able man. I learnt some too from Chambers, but was not so teachable then."

The first mention of Chambers, who succeeded Blackstone as Vinerian Professor at Oxford in 1762, is on 21st November 1754, when Johnson wrote to him at Oxford. In the summer of the same year he had visited Oxford, says Boswell, "for the first time after quitting the University." On this visit Johnson must have met Chambers. Johnson was then forty-five. As to the time that Johnson was intimate with Ballow we know nothing. Johnson went to London in 1736: about 1739 he asked Dr. Adams to consult on his behalf Dr. Smallbrooke, an advocate of Doctors' Commons, as to whether he could practise there without a Doctor's degree. It may have been at this time, when he found that he was ineligible as an advocate, that his thoughts turned to other branches of the law. Whether he endeavoured to study law seriously with Ballow, who

DR. JOHNSON AND THE LAW

was a barrister of Lincoln's Inn and the author of a work on Equity, which at one time seems to have had great vogue in the Chambers of Chancery barristers, we do not know. But it is quite clear that Johnson continued to discuss legal principles with his legal friends long after his first attempt to enter the legal profession, for his intimacy with Chambers began fifteen years after the application to Dr. Smallbrooke, at a time when, as Johnson says, he was not so teachable, though evidently not too old to learn and take an incessant interest in the law. Then again, when he had reached the comparatively mature age of fifty-six, there occurs a curious incident—the writing (1765) of a Prayer before the study of the Law. I cannot say whether this prayer is more than one which, in a few minutes of thought, he had written as suitable for any young man about to begin a career as a lawyer. For my present purpose it does not much matter whether it was intended for himself or as suitable for others. It indicates the serious attention which he gave to the law—an attention which primarily arose from particular mental attributes and which seems to have been fixed in his mind throughout his life. The same point is again exemplified by his admirable and thoughtful statement of the moral and professional position of a lawyer as an advocate, which is as appropriate now as when it was uttered—for the rationale of advocacy has never been better expressed. It is rather long for quotation, but it cannot be

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

curtailed if we are to grasp Johnson's complete opinion.

"Sir," he said, "a lawyer has no business with justice or injustice of the cause he undertakes, unless his client asks his opinion, and then he is bound to give it honestly. The justice or injustice of the course is to be decided by the judge. Consider, Sir, what is the purpose of courts of justice? It is that every man may have his cause fairly tried by men appointed to try causes. A lawyer is not to tell what he knows to be a lie, he is not to produce what he knows to be a false deed ; but he is not to usurp the province of the jury and of the judge, and determine what shall be the effect of evidence—what shall be the result of legal argument. As it rarely happens that a man is fit to plead his own cause, lawyers are a class of the community who, by study and experience, have acquired the art and power of arranging evidence, and of applying to the points at issue what the law has settled. A lawyer is to do for his client all that his client might fairly do for himself, if he could. If, by a superiority of attention, of knowledge, of skill, and a better method of communication, he has the advantage of his adversary, it is an advantage to which he is entitled. There must always be some advantage on one side or the other ; and it is better that advantage should be had by talents than by chance. If lawyers were to undertake no causes till they were sure they were just, a man might be precluded altogether from a

DR. JOHNSON AND 'THE LAW

trial of his claim, though, were it judicially examined, it might be found a very just claim."

Is it not right then to assert not only that Johnson's mind was that of a lawyer in the best sense, but that no man of letters ever gave as much attention to the subject of the law or more regarded it? English law, with its steady growth, its common sense, and its close connection with the life and temperament of the English people, was peculiarly attractive to him. This tendency would naturally cause Johnson to appreciate the society of lawyers, because he was not, as are most people—unless they happen to be litigants—averse to discuss with them the subject on which most of their lives was spent; on the other hand, the society of the lawyers with whom he foregathered must have increased his appreciation of law as well as of lawyers.

Johnson's character and mind have in the previous pages been regarded in relation to law and advocacy. Another and somewhat different point of view must now be made. Successful solicitors have been those in whom sagacity is the most prominent quality. By sagacity is meant the inherent perception of right action in practical affairs. This is by no means a common gift, for it is a union of many qualities, but it springs in the main from a peculiar instinctive perception. To advise successfully not only on technical grounds but on conduct, whether in business or general affairs, requires a pre-eminent amount of what I have termed sagacity. Johnson possessed

this quality. One has only to be familiar with his Essays in the *Rambler* to perceive how bountifully he was endowed with it. Taine, and others, have found these Essays dull, but though they contain commonplace statements, as does nearly every work, generally speaking they are filled with an immense quantity of wisdom applied to ordinary human affairs. Here again, therefore, one may claim for Johnson that he possessed a legal mind ; one, which, had his life been that, as he would have said, of an attorney, would have made him a first-rate adviser, equally at home in technical and general matters, and as a consequence he would have been a most successful member of this branch of his profession.

Proximity has much to do with friendship. "The tide of life," the Doctor once rather pathetically remarked, referring to his first law teacher Ballow, "has driven us different ways." If two men belong to the same profession it is a truism to say that they are more likely to be friends than if they were not. But if, as I have endeavoured to show, Dr. Johnson had a legal mind, clearly if he lived within reach of the Inns of Court and of Doctors' Commons he would incline by reason of it to the society of lawyers, who were his neighbours.

For Johnson the members of the College of Advocates would have a peculiar attraction. They were a singular body, half academic and half legal, so that with them Johnson would have each side of their lives in common. It is not perhaps generally known

that Sir James Marriott, who preceded Lord Stowell as Judge of the Admiralty and Prize Court, was at the same time Master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Whether he treated those who came before him, lawyers or laymen, as if they were undergraduates one cannot say. If he did he would not differ from some judges who, while not occupying this dual position, have been known to act as if those who were in their Court were *in statu pupillari*. But the holding by Marriott simultaneously of an academic and of a legal post shows very well the kind of acceptable society which Johnson would find when he visited a friend in what was then colloquially known as The Commons.

Johnson has been often called a representative Englishman. A sound critic has described him as "the embodiment of the essential features of the English character." The efficient application of justice in a practical way to affairs is a national and immemorial characteristic of the English people, and the English Common Law which is so entwined with English habits and with political evolution of the nation is typical of the English mind. Johnson thoroughly appreciated it, for he had no liking for abstract theories, he was anxious that right should prevail, and at the same time he valued precedent. So when we realize the legal qualities of Johnson's intellect we understand better why he was so representative of the British people and why he was a student and lover of the law. Indeed, one may

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

assert that until this side of Johnson's character has been apprehended, one has not fully comprehended either his intellect or his life. It is little more than surmise, but if we examine this aspect carefully yet sympathetically do we not discern a note which indicates a regret on Johnson's part that circumstances debarred him from becoming of the profession of the law? It is all very well for us now, when personal values of the eighteenth century have been definitely fixed, to be sure that Johnson's fame is world wide and continuous. But he could not see into the future, and in his lifetime Thurlow and Stowell, for example, were, even allowing for Johnson's literary reputation, men of greater eminence and of ampler fortune. Popular success and plenty were alike secured by the steady use of their intellect. Johnson knew his own capacity and could measure it with that of his contemporaries, and he might well feel that fortune had been unkind and unfair to him and regret that his special qualities never had scope in the career for which they certainly fitted him.

At the beginning of this essay a remark of Lord Stowell to Johnson was quoted that if the Doctor had become a lawyer he might have been Lord Chancellor. This was Johnson's reply. He became, says Boswell, agitated and angry, and exclaimed, "Why will you vex me by suggesting this when it is too late?" "Too late!" Can we doubt that a lifelong regret is expressed in these poignant words?

*DR. JOHNSON AND THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH*

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB

BY

THE HON. SIR CHARLES RUSSELL, BART.



Dr. Johnson and the Catholic Church



As a prelude to this paper it is necessary briefly to recall Johnson's religious history. He was, of course, a Christian ardent and convinced, and, moreover, a staunch upholder of the Protestant faith. He was a High Churchman of the old school ; but, however strict and earnest, he was large and generous in his comprehension. His attitude towards the Godhead was, it seems to me, one rather of fear than of love. He records that his first religious impression was given to him when a tiny child in bed with his mother. His mother told him that the good went to heaven and the bad were sent down to hell, and he was sent by her to convey this newly acquired information to Thomas, one of the servants.

This crude lesson in religion made a great mark upon Johnson's singularly retentive memory and coloured, I believe, his whole religious life. So, in his prayers and other expressions of his belief, we

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

find not so much the love of God as a vivid appreciation of the exacting justice of the Creator and a fear of death. He had an abnormal fear of death. He said to Boswell on the 16th September 1777 : " I never had a moment in which death was not terrible to me " ; and in February 1784 he wrote to his stepdaughter, Lucy Porter, just ten months before he died : " Death, my dear, is very dreadful."

Johnson defines " Religion " in his Dictionary as " Virtue, founded upon reverence of God and expectation of future rewards and punishments."

Precocious child that he was, at an age when most of us only begin to conceive some glimmering of religious truths, Johnson had already reached a much later phase of development. " In my tenth year," he said, " I fell into an indifference about religion." This continued until his fourteenth year, when he says that he " became a loose talker against religion " ; but in his nineteenth year, on going to Pembroke College, Oxford, he happened to pick up a book which had just been published in that year, 1728, entitled *Law's Serious Call to a Holy and Devout Life*. " Hoping," he states, " to find in it something to laugh at, I found Law an overmatch for me." Henceforth religion was the predominating object of his thoughts.

It is easy to understand Law's *Call* impressing any man and leading him onward towards a spiritual life. In character it greatly resembles many of the writings of the more ardent of the Catholic Saints,

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

but it is never gloomy ; eternal punishment or the fear of hell is seldom alluded to from the beginning to the end of the book. It teaches that a cheerful and devout life is the happiest life, and it is full of the cheerful confidence towards God which is a great characteristic of Catholic books of devotion. I am surprised, therefore, that more of this spirit does not appear in Johnson's religious life, which continued gloomy and fearful almost to the end. I say almost to the end ; for, "when the shadow was finally upon him, he was able to recognize that what was coming was divine, an angel, though formidable and obscure, and so he passed with serene composure beyond mankind." ¹

The above is an epitome of Johnson's religious life. It is obvious that he preferred the "Miserere" to the "Te Deum." His thoughts dwelt too long upon the forty days in the desert and he forgot the feast at Cana in Galilee.

It is curious to note how continually throughout his life we find Johnson in touch with Catholics and Catholic books. Wherever we find accurate records of his doings we find friendly intercourse with Catholics and their writings. His first literary effort, published in 1735, was a translation of a book written by a Jesuit Father, *The Travels of Father Lobo, S. J.* Later on, when he came to London, in 1738, he published two works : first, his poem, *London*, which immediately received its hall-mark

¹ Lord Rosebery's Lichfield Address on Johnson.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

from a Catholic, the Infallible Pope—Alexander then in undisputed possession of the poetic throne in England.¹ In the same year he wrote his *Life of Father Sarpi*, an Italian Catholic ecclesiastic famous for his writings on the Council of Trent.

When Boswell appeared on the scene and met Johnson in Davis's shop in May of 1763, he found the Philosopher, then fifty-four years of age, with quite a long list of Catholic acquaintances. There was Thomas Hussey, the Catholic Bishop of Waterford, first President of Maynooth and one of the few Catholic Fellows of the Royal Society. When Johnson met him he was Chaplain to the Spanish Chapel. There was Mrs. Strickland, the lady from Cumberland whom Johnson described as "a very high lady"; there was Dr. Nugent, father-in-law of Edmund Burke; Mrs. Edmund Burke, General Paoli, Joseph Baretti, whose life he helped to save by giving evidence as to his character when he was tried at the Old Bailey. Arthur Murphy, too, who introduced Johnson to the Thrales in 1764, was a Catholic, educated at St. Omer's. Then, later, we find a warm friendship established with Father Cowley, the Benedictine; with Father Wilkes of the Sorbonne, and Father Brewer. Finally, in his last illness, Johnson was cared for with marked devotion by

¹ In the next year, 1739, Alexander Pope, though I cannot find that he ever met Johnson, tried to persuade Dean Swift to obtain for him a Degree from Dublin University, which he thought would help Johnson in his career. However, later, it was from Dublin Johnson received the right to call himself "Doctor."

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

another Catholic, Mr. Sastres, a friend of many years' standing, to whom he administered a very solemn warning on no account to change his religion unless he was absolutely convinced that he was in error. To this gentleman, it will be remembered, he left a legacy in his will.

It may fairly be surmised that he had made many other Catholic friends, for this reason : in the very centre of the district covered by Johnson's many residences there were several Catholic chapels, rare objects in those days. The one in Golden Square still exists (the entrance being in Warwick Street, Regent Street), and the other was in Sardinia Street, Lincoln's Inn (lately moved into Kingsway).

The rarity at this date of Catholic chapels in London was due to the fact that the only exception to the laws prohibiting Catholic worship was that ambassadors were allowed to have Catholic chapels in connection with their embassies, and to these chapels the English Catholics flocked. Hence, to this very day Catholics in London worship in churches still bearing the names "of the Bavarian Chapel," "the Sardinian Chapel," "the Spanish Chapel," "and "the French Chapel," although the Bavarians, the Sardinians, the Spanish, and the French have little to do with them.

As Boswell says, Johnson "had an eager and unceasing curiosity to know human life in all its variety," and in passing and repassing these institutions, as Johnson must have done many thousands of times, this curiosity would never have remained satisfied

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

until he had made the acquaintance of their interiors and discussed matters with their priests, who were gentlemen of education and learning, and generally Englishmen.¹

We know that Johnson stated that all prison chaplains ought to be Catholic priests or Wesleyan ministers. "Sir," he said, "one of our regular clergy will probably not impress their mind sufficiently; they should be attended by a Methodist preacher or a Popish priest." It is unlikely that he would make such a statement unless he had heard them preach.

Another reason for believing that Johnson heard them preach is that in those days, although the ambassadors were allowed to have chapels, they were not allowed to have sermons in their chapels, and the various congregations of the faithful had to resort to the expedient of adjourning to the upper chamber of some adjoining tavern, and there, with the aid of pots of beer and long clay pipes, to hear the sermons of their pastors. The congregation of the Sardinian Chapel used to assemble in a public-house, which still exists, called the "Ship," situated in the Turnstile, Lincoln's Inn Fields,² and I like to fancy, as I go through that passage, that Johnson probably found his way to the upper chamber and partook of the

¹ Johnson had no prejudice against entering Catholic churches. He attended Mass several times when he visited Paris with the Thrales in 1775. When he visited Scotland with Boswell in 1773 he firmly refused to enter a church.

² The celebrated preacher, Father James Archer (1740-1823), who was converted by Bishop Challoner's preaching and took Holy Orders, was originally a "pot boy" at the "Ship."

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

beer, even if he did not smoke the clay pipe, with the Catholic congregation there assembled. He certainly must have been aware of this Catholic practice, for nobody knew the tavern life of London better than he.

Johnson was a great habitu  , too, of the Temple. It is true that no Catholic was admitted to the English Bar until 1791,¹ and the first Catholic K.C. was made only in 1831. Nevertheless, there existed a branch of the law (now extinct), members of which were known as "Special Pleaders"; they were gentlemen who drew the written pleadings but never appeared in Court. Catholics, shut out from the Bar, in considerable numbers became Special Pleaders. In Lincoln's Inn, too, Catholics became Conveyancers, although not members of the Bar; and it is more than likely that in this way Johnson made other Catholic friends.

We know also, from his own statements to Boswell, that Johnson visited at least one Catholic convent of English nuns, because he refers to his discussion with the Lady Abbess: "I said to the Lady Abbess of a convent, 'Madam, you are here, not for the love of virtue, but for the fear of vice.' She said she should remember this as long as she lived. I thought it hard to give her this view of her situation, when she could not help it."

¹ Charles Butler, nephew of Alban Butler, was the first Catholic barrister (1791), and he was also the first Catholic K.C. (1831). The first Catholic judge was Sir William Shee, in 1863. The first Catholic Attorney-General was Sir Charles Russell, in 1887. He was also the first Catholic Lord Chief Justice of England (1894).

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Boswell adds : “ I wondered at the whole of what he now said, because both in his *Rambler* and *Idler* he treats religious austerities with much solemnity of respect.”

On the occasion of his visiting Paris with the Thrales in 1775, we know that Johnson visited several monasteries, and actually resided for a brief time in a monk's cell in a Benedictine monastery, which he left with some emotion, for he records : “ I parted very tenderly from the Prior and Father Wilkes ” ; and he received from the Prior, to whom he had endeared himself, the promise that his cell would always be ready for him.

Finally, to complete a list of Johnson's Catholic (or ex-Catholic) friends, we must mention that fraudulent old rascal Psalmanaszer, who was originally a Catholic, and whom Johnson regarded almost as a saint.

I have dwelt at some length upon these various friendships and acquaintances because they account for one outstanding fact about Johnson's attitude towards the Catholic Church which differentiates Johnson from too many of her critics, ancient or modern, namely, that he took the trouble thoroughly to understand what he was talking about. He may have differed from Catholics, but he, at any rate, understood in what he differed. He honestly tried to understand the Catholic point of view, and he never attempted to misrepresent Catholic teaching. His many Catholic friends gave him the opportunity of acquiring accurate information.

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

But what were Johnson's views on the Catholic Articles of Faith and Catholic practices ? He appears, at different times, to have discussed all the most important points of Catholic doctrine with Boswell : the Real Presence, the Doctrine of Purgatory, Prayers for the Dead, Invocation of the Saints, Confession and Absolution. On each point he shows accurate knowledge, and he invariably admits the reasonableness of the Catholic point of view, even if he is not prepared to agree with it.

It may perhaps be worth while following the dates and order in which these matters arise in Boswell's *Life*.

Sorrow and loss drove Johnson, like many others, to consider the lawfulness of prayers for the dead and the doctrine of purgatory. He was only forty-two years of age when he lost his wife in 1751, his beloved "Tettie," and for the remaining thirty-three years of his life he never ceased to pray for the repose of her soul and that she might be finally received into eternal happiness, at first prefacing his prayers with the proviso, "so far as it may be lawful in me." In course of time mention of this proviso disappears. He prayed in like manner for his father, continuing such prayers for some fifty years after his father's death.

Boswell met Johnson only in May 1763, and by August of the same year their friendship had ripened so quickly that Johnson journeyed with Boswell down to Harwich to see Boswell start upon his famous

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Continental tour. On the stage coach Johnson astonished the passengers by his views on the Spanish Inquisition. Boswell records the event thus :

“ In the afternoon the gentlewoman talked violently against the Roman Catholics and of the horrors of the Inquisition. To the utter astonishment of all the passengers but myself, who knew that he could talk upon any side of a question, he defended the Inquisition, and maintained that ‘ false doctrine should be checked on its first appearance ; that the civil power should unite with the Church in punishing those who dare to attack the established religion, and that such only were punished by the Inquisition.’ ”

Boswell assumed that Johnson was doing so because he could talk upon any side. I think Boswell was wrong. I believe it is clear, from Johnson’s discussions on the subject of “ Liberty,” that the old philosopher would have been a stern persecutor of error and a firm disciple of Torquemada had he had the chance. He more than once declared, “ The State has the right to regulate the religion of the people ” ; and I regret to say I believe he would have boiled the oil and polished up the thumbscrew and applied his test of martyrdom with regret but determination.

Boswell received his next shock in 1772, when he and Johnson determined to make the tour of the Hebrides. In the course of their preparations he asked Johnson whether there was any objection to his taking a Catholic servant with him on the pro-

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

jected tour, and was curtly told by Johnson : “ Sir, if he has no objection, you can have none.”

Soon after there was a general questioning by Boswell as to Johnson’s views on Catholicity. His cross-examination of Johnson was complete and persevering :

BOSWELL. What, Sir, do you think of Purgatory ?

JOHNSON. I consider it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits, and, therefore, that God is graciously pleased to allow a middle state. Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this.

BOSWELL. But they, Sir, offer Masses for the dead.

JOHNSON. Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in Purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life.

Johnson might also have referred Boswell to certain passages in Scripture in which we are told it is “ a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sin.”

Boswell, with his usual perseverance, was not going to let matters rest, for he pushed on : “ The idolatry of the Mass, sir ? ”

Whereupon Johnson thundered at him : “ There is no idolatry in the Mass. They believe God to be there and they adore Him.”

“ The worship of the Saints,” cried Boswell.

JOHNSON. They do not worship the Saints ; they invoke the Saints ; they ask their prayers.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Boswell had one more shot left, and he fired it, uttering the single word, "Confession !"

JOHNSON. I do not know but that it is a good thing ; and he further pointed out that Absolution was entirely conditional on repentance and penance.

Throughout the trip there were many discussions on religious matters, and sometimes on Catholic Doctrine. On the 20th August 1773, whilst in the post-chaise on the road from Dundee, even the subject of Transubstantiation was discussed. "On that awful subject," as Boswell calls it, he records Johnson's opinion that the Catholics were in error in their construction of the Scriptures. But Johnson added, "Had God never spoken figuratively, we might hold that He spoke literally."

Johnson's attitude towards converts is interesting. He held the theory that every man was justified in adhering strictly to the religion in which he was born, or, as he put it, "the religion in which Providence had placed him." If he did so he was "safe," and a man was not justified in abandoning such religion unless he was overwhelmed with the conviction that he was in error. He doubted the sincerity of conversions which entailed the giving up of belief, but he believed apparently in the sincerity of conversions in which belief was increased. Boswell records his words on the matter as follows :

"A man who is converted from Protestantism to Popery may be sincere : he parts with nothing :

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

he is only superadding to what he already had. But a convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up so much of what he has held sacred as anything that he retains : there is so much *laceration of mind* in such a conversion, that it can hardly be sincere and lasting."

Holding these views, we find him in his *Life of Dryden* treating the poet's somewhat timely if not suspect conversion to Catholicism on the occasion of the accession of James II with marked toleration :

"Soon after the accession of King James and the design of reconciling the nation to the Church of Rome became apparent, and the religion of the Court gave the only efficacious title to its favours, Dryden declared himself a convert to Popery. This at any other time might have passed with little censure. . . . That conversion will always be suspected that apparently concurs with interest. He that never finds his error till it hinders his progress towards wealth or honour will not be thought to love truth only for herself. Yet it may easily happen that information may come at a commodious time, and as truth and interest are not by any fatal necessity at variance, that one may by accident introduce the other. When opinions are struggling into popularity, the arguments by which they are opposed or defended become more known. . . . It is natural to suppose that a comprehensive is likewise an elevated soul, and that whoever is wise is also honest . . . but enquiries into

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

the heart are not for man, who must now leave Dryden to his Judge."

Boswell records that in 1784 he was present when Mrs. Kennicot informed him of the conversion of the Rev. Mr. Chamberlayne, and his forfeiting his living to join the Church of Rome, upon which Johnson fervently exclaimed, "God bless him!" On the other hand, when Hannah More informed him that his young friend Miss Jane Harry had become a Quakeress, he denounced the lady :

"Madam, she is an odious wench. She could not have had any proper conviction that it was her duty to change her religion, which is the most important of all subjects, and should be studied with all care and with all the helps we can get. She knew no more of the Church which she left, and that which she embraced, than she did of the difference between the Copernican and Ptolemaick systems."

MRS. KNOWLES. She had the New Testament before her.

JOHNSON. Madam, she could not understand the New Testament, the most difficult book in the world, for which the study of a life is required.

MRS. KNOWLES. It is clear as to essentials.

JOHNSON. But not as to controversial points. The heathens are easily converted, because they had nothing to give up ; but we ought not, without very strong conviction indeed, to desert the religion in which we have been educated. That is the religion given you, the religion in which it may be said Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may be safe. But error is dangerous indeed if you err when you choose a religion for yourself.

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

MRS. KNOWLES. Must we then go by implicit faith?

JOHNSON. Why, madam, the greatest part of our knowledge is implicit faith; and as to religion, have we heard all that a disciple of Confucius, all that a Mahometan, can say for himself?

He then rose into passion, and attacked the young proselyte in the severest terms of reproach, so that both ladies seemed to be much shocked.

Mrs. Knowles wrote years after a very different account¹ of this conversation (too long to quote) which gives to herself a suspiciously large share of the honours of war.

In the same spirit was Johnson's advice to Francisco Sastres, to whom he wrote as follows :

“There is no one who has shown me more attention than you have done. It is now right you should claim some from me. . . . Let me exhort you always to think of my situation, which must one day be yours. Always remember life is short and that eternity never ends. I say nothing of your religion, for if you conscientiously keep to it I have little doubt that you may be safe. If you read the controversy, I think we have right on our side; but if you do not read it, be not persuaded from any worldly consideration to alter the religion in which you are educated. Change not but from conviction of reason.”

It is somewhat difficult to reconcile with all this

¹ See the *Gentleman's Magazine* of June 1791, where her “mild fortitude” is contrasted with Johnson's “boisterous violence of bigoted sophistry.”

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

his welcoming Father Compton, the Catholic priest who joined the Church of England. Johnson charitably gave him shelter and money, and found him employment under the Bishop of London. Is it possible that the sturdy Johnson was disarmed by Father Compton's assurance that he owed his conversion to the Church of England to reading Johnson's Paper 110 of the *Rambler* on the subject of Repentance. I have read the paper in question, and I must say I cannot see anything in it which need disturb anybody's convictions, Catholic or Protestant.

I think there can be no doubt Dr. Johnson was at some time in his life very nearly becoming a convert himself and joining the Catholic Church.

"I would be a papist if I could ; I have fear enough but an obstinate rationality prevents me. I shall never be a papist except at the near approach of death."

Indeed his sympathy with the doctrines and teaching of the Catholic Church were such that Bennett Langton's father died under the impression that he was in fact a member of the Catholic Church.

On some questions connected with Catholic practice there is no doubt that Dr. Johnson at different times held different opinions. At one time he is strongly in favour of monasteries, and at another he condemns them. They always appear, however, to have an attraction for him. When Baretti pressed him to visit Italy he replied that "the monasteries would interest him more than the palaces."

JOHNSON AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Boswell puts forward the contention that, because Johnson sometimes appeared to support the Catholic Church and at other times to oppose it, it was clear he was only "talking for victory" and not expressing his convictions ; but it is to be remarked that as a rule when Johnson spoke in its favour he always backed up his assertions with cogent argument, but when he spoke against the Catholic Church his language was generally mere denunciation. Thus he said :

In everthing they differ from us they are wrong.
Purgatory is made a lucrative imposition.
Giving the Sacrament in one kind is criminal.
Invocation of the Saints is will worship and presumption.

On other occasions Johnson expressed the view that there was no important difference between the teachings of various Christian bodies.

In matters of morality Johnson was a stern upholder of virtue. No lines in his writings call for expurgation, and in his conversation he was equally uncompromising. Boswell records a conversation at Oxford in June of 1784, when he had the resolution to ask Johnson whether he thought the roughness of his manner had been an advantage or not, and if he would not have done more good if he had been more gentle.

JOHNSON. No, Sir, I have done more good as I am. Obscenity and impiety have always been repressed in my company.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

To this Boswell quaintly replies : “ Sir, that is more than can be said of every bishop.”

Men like Johnson are the champions of faith and of morality in their time, and whatever particular name may be assigned to Samuel Johnson’s beliefs, he was a glorious exponent of religion, as defined by the Apostle St. James :

“ Religion clean and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their tribulation and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Johnson welcomed and sheltered the blind and sick, he provided for the orphan, he lifted the fallen, he held out his strong hand even to the criminal and the imprisoned. His home was a veritable house of charity ; and after a long life of seventy-three years’ hard battling with the world his huge heart remained as unsullied as a child’s.

*JOHNSON'S CHARACTER
AS SHOWN IN HIS WRITINGS*

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,
14TH DECEMBER 1914,

BY

HAROLD SPENCER SCOTT



Johnson's Character as shown in his Writings



“DR. JOHNSON told me,” says Mrs. Piozzi, “that the character of Sober in the *Idler* was by himself—intended as his own portrait.” This *Idler* appeared on 18th November 1758, when Johnson was still living in Gough Square. He was then forty-nine, his wife had been dead some six years, and the Dictionary had been published three years. Another three years were to pass by before he entered on his pensioned ease. Boswell and the Thrales were unknown to him and the Club unfounded.

In 1756 Johnson had agreed with those “liberal-minded men the booksellers”¹ to edit Shakespeare : yet after two years’ inactivity, his friends found him roused to action and engaged not in the prosecution of the Shakespeare, which he had promised to have ready by Christmas 1757, but in furnishing a series of periodical essays entitled *The Idler*. When Hawkins

¹ *Boswell*, i. 304.

congratulated him on being engaged on Shakespeare, a work that suited his genius and would be executed *con amore*, Johnson's answer was : " It is all work, and my inducement to it is not love or desire of fame, but the want of money, which is the only motive to writing that I know of,"¹ and Johnson was thinking of himself when he wrote of Dryden : " If the excellence of his works was lessened by his indigence, their number was increased : I know not how it will be proved that he would have undergone the toil of an author, ' if he had not been solicited by something more pressing than the love of praise.'"² The opening sentence in the *Idler* paper, however, shows that there was at least one other incentive to writing, weariness of himself, and we may perhaps recall also a *Rambler* paper, where Johnson says that " praise is so pleasing to the mind of man that it is the original motive of almost all our actions. . . . None, however mean, ever sinks below the hope of being distinguished by his fellow-beings, and very few have by magnanimity or piety been so raised above it, as to act wholly without regard to censure or opinion."³ At any rate Johnson, in spite of his pension, finished his Shakespeare and wrote the *Journey to the Western Islands* and the *Lives of the Poets*.

But to get to the character of Johnson in the *Idler* : " Sober is a man of strong desires and quick

¹ Hawkins's *Life of Johnson*, p. 363. ² *Lives of the Poets*, i. 423.

³ *Rambler*, No. 193.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

imagination so exactly balanced by the love of ease that they seldom stimulate him to any difficult undertaking ; they have, however, so much power that they will not suffer him to lie quite at rest ; and though they do not make him sufficiently useful to others, they make him at least weary of himself.

“ Mr. Sober’s chief pleasure is conversation ; there is no end of his talk or his attention ; to speak or to hear is equally pleasing : for he still fancies that he is teaching or learning something and is free for the time from his reproaches. But there is one time at night when he must go home that his friends may sleep ; and another time in the morning when all the world agrees to shut out interruptions. These are the moments of which poor Sober trembles at the thought.” Sober, the paper continues, has many means of alleviating the misery of these tiresome intervals : he supplied himself with a carpenter’s tools and “ mended his coal-box very successfully,” and he attempted the crafts of the shoemaker, tinman, plumber, and potter.

“ In all these he has failed, and resolves to qualify himself for them by better information. But his daily amusement is chemistry. He has a small furnace which he employs in distillation and which has long been the solace of his life. He draws oils and waters and essences and spirits which he knows to be of no use ; sits and counts the drops as they come from his retort, and forgets that whilst a drop is falling a moment flies away. Poor Sober, I have

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

often teased him with reproof, and he has often promised reformation ; for no man is so much open to conviction as the *Idler*, but there is none on whom it operates so little.

“ What will be the effect of this paper, I know not ; perhaps he will read it and laugh and light the fire in his furnace : but my hope is that he will quit his trifles and betake himself to rational and useful diligence.”

Now this, I think, brings before us a Johnson whom we know from reading our *Boswells*, and the traits noted in *Sober* have been described as characteristics of Johnson both by his friends and by himself.

“ He resigned himself to indolence,” writes Murphy, “ took no exercise, rose about two, and then received the visits of his friends. Authors long forgotten waited on him as their oracle, and he listened to the complaints, the schemes, the hopes and fears of a crowd of inferior beings who ‘ lived men knew not how and died obscure men knew not when.’ ”¹

There is no doubt that Johnson’s mind at this time was still, as Murphy says, “ strained and overlaboured by constant exertion and called for an interval of repose and indolence.”² But Johnson always exaggerated his own idleness: and we rejoice that he gave up to talk time which might have been spent in writing. Still he was never quite at ease on this point ; and he was, I think, answering his

¹ *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Dr. Johnson*, p. 88.

² *Ibid.* p. 79.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

own conscience when he replied to Boswell's importunity : " Sir, the good I can do by my conversation bears the same proportion to the good I can do by my writings that the practice of a physician, retired to a small town, does to his practice in a great city."¹

His best justification, perhaps, may be found in his own words in a *Rambler* : " Every man of genius has some arts of fixing the attention peculiar to himself by which honestly exerted he may benefit mankind."²

To procrastination and idleness Johnson was very gentle when he came to write the lives of those poets who had known the " poverty which is want of competence of all that can soften the miseries of life, of all that can diversify attention or delight imagination."³ He remembers his own past when he too suffered that " degree of want by which the freedom of agency is almost destroyed."⁴ " Collins," writes Johnson, " came to London a literary adventurer, with many projects in his head and very little money in his pocket. He designed many works, but his great fault was irresolution, or the frequent calls of immediate necessity broke his schemes and suffered him to pursue no settled purpose. A man doubtful of his dinner or trembling at a creditor is not much disposed to abstracted meditation or remote enquiries.

¹ *Boswell*, ii. 15.

² *Rambler*, No. 87.

³ Review of Soame Jenyns's *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, Works, vi. 54.

Lives of the Poets, iii. 338.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

He published proposals for a *History of the Revival of Learning*. [Johnson projected a work under the same title.] But probably not a page of the *History* was ever written. He planned several tragedies, but he only planned them. He wrote now and then odes and other poems and did something, however little.”¹

“Thompson,” writes Johnson, “had often felt the inconvenience of idleness, but he never cured it : and was so conscious of his own character that he talked of writing an Eastern tale of the man who loved to be in distress.”²

When Johnson tells how Savage “would prolong his conversation till midnight without considering that business might require his friends’ application in the morning,”³ he remembered his own dread of the hour when he must go home that his friends may sleep. Like Savage, Johnson was “censured for not knowing when to retire,” and he is pleading his own excuses when he says that this “was not the defect of Savage’s judgment, but of his fortune.”⁴ Johnson, like Savage, when he left his company, was “abandoned to gloomy reflections, which it is not strange that he delayed as long as he could ; and sometimes forgot that he gave others pain to avoid it himself.”⁵

As to Sober’s practice of the manual arts, I do not know whether we can quite fancy Johnson

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 335.

² *Ibid.* iii. 297.

³ *Ibid.* ii. 400.

⁴ *Ibid.* ii. 430.

⁵ *Ibid.* ii. 431.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

successfully mending his coal-box. He was probably more successful in watering and pruning his vine, which was another of his occupations. But all his life Johnson was very fond of chemistry. Hawkins describes Johnson's laboratory in the garret over his Inner Temple chambers, and mentions "the strong but very nauseous spirit drawn by him from the dregs of strong beer, which all might smell but few chose to taste"¹; and Mrs. Piozzi relates how a sort of laboratory was set up at Streatham; adding, however, that "the danger Mr. Thrale found his friend in one day when he had got the children and servants round him to see some experiments performed put an end to all our entertainment."² Yet in his jesting over Sober's furnace and retort, Johnson might have remembered one of his own *Ramblers*, with its defence of curiosity as "one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect," "the first passion and the last in great and generous minds."³

In Sober's promised reformation to quit his trifles and betake himself to rational and useful diligence, we may recall many an entry in Johnson's journal. "I have now spent fifty-five years in resolving, having from the earliest time almost that I can remember been forming schemes of a better life,"⁴ and as Professor Raleigh has pointed out, there is more of Johnson than of Milton in his excuse for the poet's

¹ *Life of Johnson*, p. 413.

² *Anecdotes*, p. 236.

³ *Rambler*, No. 103, No. 150.

⁴ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 58.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

omission of a set hour for prayer¹: "the neglect of it in his family was probably a fault for which he condemned himself and which he intended to correct, but that death, as too often happens, intercepted his reformation,"² and he can sympathize with Gray, who "accepted the Professorship of History at Cambridge and retained it to his death; always designing lectures but never reading them; uneasy at his neglect of duty and appeasing his uneasiness with designs of reformation and with a resolution which he believed himself to have made of resigning the office if he found himself unable to discharge it."³

We remember also how the Prince in *Rasselas* passes "four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves."⁴

So much for Sober, which after all shows only a small side of Johnson: and a sad one. There is nothing of the Johnson who drank three bottles of port without being the worse for it—University College has witnessed this⁵—or of the Johnson who, as Garrick said, "gives you a forcible hug and shakes laughter out of you whether you will or no."⁶ "Have you not observed in all our conversations," Johnson asks Mrs. Piozzi, "that my genius is always in extremes, that I am very noisy or very silent, very gloomy or very merry, very sour or very kind?"⁷ Unless there was some one to draw him out, Johnson

¹ *Six Essays on Johnson*, p. 134.

³ *Ibid* iii. 428.

⁵ *Boswell*, iii. 245.

⁷ *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ii. 184.

² *Lives of the Poets*, i. 156.

⁴ *Rasselas*, ch. iv.

⁶ *Ibid*. ii. 231.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

would often sit quite silent, and “no one was less willing,” says Mrs. Piozzi, “to begin any discourse than himself.”¹ “Tom Tyers described me the best,” said Johnson: “you are like a ghost. You never speak till you are spoken to.”² That Johnson was ever teased with reproof into reformation is unlikely. If his own conscience failed to rouse him to a successful effort, it would have been vain for a friend to give him counsel. On one occasion Benett Langton, whom Johnson had charged to tell him sincerely in what he thought his life was faulty, brought a sheet of paper on which was written several texts of scripture, recommending Christian charity. “And when I questioned him,” Johnson indignantly told Boswell, “all that he could say amounted to this—that I sometimes contradicted people in conversation.”³ But then Johnson looked upon himself as a very polite man, though he admitted that Dr. Barnard, the Provost of Eton, was the only man that did justice to his good breeding⁴; and according to Mrs. Piozzi he told Mr. Thrale that he had never sought to please till past thirty years, considering the matter as hopeless, though he had been always studious not to make enemies by apparent preference of himself.⁵ To Boswell’s suggestion that Langton meant the manner in which he contradicted people—roughly and harshly—all that Johnson would say was: “And who is the worse for that?”

¹ *Anecdotes*, p. 208.

² *Boswell*, iii. 307.

³ *Ibid.* iv. 280.

⁴ *Piozzi Anecdotes*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 258.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

On the other hand we have Sir John Hawkins' testimony to the patience with which Johnson bore reprehension : and in proof of this Hawkins says that " he found preserved among Johnson's papers, and placed in an obvious situation in his bureau, an anonymous letter full of home truths concerning Johnson's propensity to contradiction, his want of deference to the opinions of others, his contention for victory, his local prejudices and aversions, and other evil habits in conversation which made his acquaintance shunned by many who highly esteemed him."¹ Johnson's own view of his politeness we know : " No man is so cautious not to interrupt another ; no man thinks it so necessary to appear attentive when others are speaking : no man so steadily refuses preference to himself or so willingly bestows it on another as I do, no man holds so strongly as I do the necessity of ceremony and the ill effects which follow the breach of it : yet people think me rude."²

I think, however, that Johnson had himself in mind in the following passage in one of his *Adventurers* : " Men are frequently betrayed to the use of such arguments as are not in themselves strictly defensible. A man heated in talk and eager of victory takes advantage of the mistakes or ignorance of his adversary, lays hold of concessions to which he knows he has no right, and urges proofs likely to prevail on

¹ *Life of Johnson*, p. 601.

² *Piozzii Anecdotes*, p. 36.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

his opponent, though he knows himself they have no force." ¹

"I look upon myself to be a man very much misunderstood," said Johnson two years before his death: "I am not an uncandid nor am I a severe man. I sometimes say more than I mean in jest, and people are apt to believe me serious." ²

Much of what Johnson says of Savage is his own story. Johnson, who was to be made happy, by hearing this very life of Savage praised by a guest at Cave's table, while he himself sat behind a screen with a plate of victuals, sent to him there because he was dressed so shabbily ³ that he did not choose to appear, was not only pleading Savage's cause when he wrote: "The insolence and resentment of which Savage is accused were not easily to be avoided by a great mind, irritated by perpetual hardship and constrained hourly to return the spurns of contempt and repress the insolence of prosperity." ⁴ And Johnson is pleading his own case when many years later he wrote in reference to Gray's quarrel with Horace Walpole: "Men whose consciousness of their own merit sets them above the compliance of servility are apt enough in their associations with superiors to watch their own dignity with troublesome and punctilious jealousy and in the fervour of independence to exact that attention which they refuse to pay." ⁵

¹ *Adventurer*, No. 85,

² *Boswell*, iv. 239.

³ *Ibid.* i. 163 n.

⁴ *Lives of the Poets*, ii. 433.

⁵ *Ibid.* ii. 422.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

The generous praise bestowed by Johnson on Savage is praise for virtues which Johnson greatly valued and which he must have known were his own. "Compassion was indeed the distinguishing quality of Savage; he never appeared inclined to take advantage of weakness, to attack the defenceless, or to press upon the falling : whoever was distressed was certain at least of his good wishes ; and when he could give no assistance to extricate them from misfortunes, he endeavoured to sooth them by sympathy and tenderness." ¹

We recall Goldsmith's reply to Boswell, who wondered at Johnson's tenderness to a man of bad character : "He is now become miserable and that insures the protection of Johnson." ²

Savage had befriended Johnson when he came up to town, a literary adventurer, and Johnson never forgot kindness. In the *Life of Walsh* he credits Pope with like gratitude : "The kindnesses which are first experienced are seldom forgotten." Pope always retained a grateful memory of Walsh's notice, and mentioned him in one of his later pieces among those who had encouraged his juvenile studies :

... Granville the polite

And knowing Walsh would tell me I could write.³

We think of Johnson himself when we read that Savage "always preserved a steady confidence in his own

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, ii. 355.

² *Boswell*, i. 417.

³ *Lives of the Poets*, i. 329.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

capacity” and “whatever faults may be imputed to him the virtue of suffering well cannot be denied him.”¹

Like Savage, Johnson’s distresses, however afflictive, never dejected him ; in his lowest state he wanted not spirit to assert the natural dignity of wit, and was always ready to repress that insolence which the superiority of wealth incited : “. . . he never admitted any gross familiarities or submitted to be treated otherwise than as an equal.”²

And as Dr. Birkbeck Hill says : “Who does not think not of the man whose biography was written, but of the biographer himself, when he reads : “Savage had the peculiar felicity that his attention never deserted him ; he was present to every object and regardful of the most trifling occurrences. . . . To this quality is to be imputed the extent of his knowledge, compared with the small time which he spent in visible endeavours to acquire it. He mingled in cursory conversation with the same steadiness of attention as others apply to a lecture. . . . His judgment was eminently exact both with regard to writings and to men. The knowledge of life was indeed his chief attainment.”³

In the *Life of Collins* it is not only Collins that Johnson defends : “His morals were pure and his opinions pious. In a long continuance of poverty and long habits of dissipation [Johnson here means

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, ii. 403, 423. ² *Ibid.* i. 401.

³ *Ibid.* ii. 430 ; *Boswell*, i. 167, n 4.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

scattered attention] it cannot be expected that any character should be exactly uniform. There is a degree of want by which the freedom of agency is almost destroyed and long association with fortuitous companions will at last relax the strictness of truth and abate the fervour of sincerity. It may be said that at least he preserved the source of action unpolluted, that his principles were never shaken, that his distinctions of right and wrong were never confounded, and that his faults had nothing of malignity or design, but proceeded from some unexpected pressure or casual temptation.”¹ There is much in this to remind us of Johnson. A penitent, Boswell was almost inclined to believe that his great oracle Johnson did allow too much credit to “good principles without good practice.”² Prior was a worse man than Collins, and his life seemed to Johnson “irregular, negligent, and sensual,” yet Johnson adds that Prior’s “opinion seem to have been right”³: and to Savage, whose character was marked by profligacy, insolence, and ingratitude, Johnson pays the tribute that “he always preserved a strong sense of the dignity, the beauty, and the necessity of virtue.”⁴ So Johnson, in spite of his own inflexible integrity and his wide charity, finds consolation in the hope that he too has “preserved the source of action unpolluted.”⁵

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 338.

² *Letters of Boswell*, ed. Thomas Seccombe, 1908, p. 272.

³ *Lives of the Poets*, ii. 200.

Ibid. ii. 380.

Ibid. iii. 338.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

“I hope,” he wrote on Easter Eve 1781, “that I have advanced by pious reflections in my submission to God and my benevolence to man ; but I have corrected no external habits nor have kept any of the resolutions made in the beginning of the year.”¹ When we turn to these resolutions we find that they are against neglect of bible reading and public worship and against indolence. And this is the case, in the main, all through Johnson’s *Prayers and Meditations*. When he confesses himself a great sinner he is accusing himself, I think, of negligence of religion and failure through indolence to make the best use of his life, and not, as Boswell suggests, of any sins of deed which he may have committed.²

If Johnson’s defence of Savage often touches a personal note in *Rasselas*, we see in the character of the scholar Imlac, as Sir Joshua Reynolds says, a comment on Dr. Johnson’s own practice.³ If the choice of life had ever been his, Johnson, like Imlac, would have wandered over many countries, drinking at the fountain of knowledge to quench the thirst of curiosity. Johnson had not lived in courts ; but he was exercised in business and stored with observation ; he had “found the delight of knowledge and felt the pleasure of intelligence and the pride of invention.” He had studied man and nature and all the modes of life. He had longed to be a poet, and even after twenty years of wandering still felt at times

¹ *Prayers and Meditations*, i. 192.

² *Boswell*, iv. 397.

³ *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ii. 220.

the enthusiastic fit. He is free from all envy, malignity, or cynicism. He takes pleasure in the company of the young. "His trade was wisdom," and he moralizes on everything that he meets—on life in all its forms, on the nature of the soul, on death and immortality."¹

"Sir," said Imlac, "my history will not be long : the life that is devoted to knowledge passes silently away and is very little diversified by events. To talk in public, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire and answer enquiries, is the business of a scholar. He wanders about the world without pomp or terror, and is neither known or valued but by men like himself."² But in the Prince also we hear Johnson, and the Princess too is often an "undisguised Johnson." Johnson was thinking of his own youth—and of every one's youth—when he describes how the chief amusement of the Prince in the Happy Valley "was to picture to himself that world which he had never seen : to place himself in various conditions, to be entangled in imaginary difficulties and to be engaged in wild adventures : but his benevolence always terminated his projects in the relief of distress, the detection of fraud, the defeat of oppression, and the diffusion of happiness"³ : or when Imlac relates how he amused himself during a voyage by learning from the sailors the art of navigation which he had never practised, and sometimes by fixing schemes

¹ *Rasselas*, ed. Birkbeck Hill, Intro., p. 30.

² *Ibid.* ch. viii.

³ *Ibid.* ch. iv.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

for his conduct in different situations in not one of which he has been ever placed.¹

"It was the felicity of Pope," writes Johnson, "to rate himself at his real value"² : and Milton seems to him "to have been well acquainted with his own genius and to know what it was that nature had bestowed upon him more bountifully than upon others."³ Johnson, too, had that self-confidence which, as he says, "is the first requisite to great undertakings."⁴ "I knew very well what I was undertaking," said Johnson of his Dictionary ; "and very well how to do it, and have done it very well"⁵ : and he knew, too, that his strength lay in biography.⁶ Nor were his failings hid from him. Having read one of his *Ramblers* and being asked how he liked it, Johnson shook his head and answered, "Too wordy."⁷ And when some one began reading aloud *Irene*, he left the room, replying, when he was asked the reason of this, "Sir, I thought it had been better."⁸

It cannot be but that his own character was in his thoughts when he wrote : "A mind like Dryden's always curious, always active, to whom every understanding was proud to be associated and of which every one solicited the regard by an ambitious display of himself, had a more pleasant, perhaps a nearer way to knowledge than by the silent progress of solitary reading. I do not suppose that he despised books

¹ *Rasselas*, ch. ix.

³ *Ibid.* i. 177.

⁵ *Boswell*, iii. 405.

⁷ *Ibid.* iv. 5.

² *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 89.

⁴ *Ibid.* iii. 89.

⁶ *Ibid.* iv. 34 n.

⁸ *Ibid.* iv. 5.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

or intentionally neglected them ; but that he was carried out by the impetuosity of his genius to more vivid and speedy instructors, and that his studies were rather desultory and fortuitous than constant and systematical.”¹

Like Dryden, Johnson “gleans his knowledge from accidental intelligence and various conversation, by a quick apprehension, a judicious selection and a happy memory, a keen appetite of knowledge and a powerful digestion.”²

Johnson also rises before us in the following passage in the *Life of Pope* : “When Pope entered into the living world it seems to have happened to him as to many others that he was less attentive to dead masters : he studied in the academy of Paracelsus and made the universe his favourite volume. He gathered his notions fresh from reality, not from the copies of authors but the originals of nature. His frequent references to history, his allusions to various kinds of knowledge, and his images selected from art and nature, with his observations on the operations of the mind and the modes of life show an intelligence perpetually on the wing, excursive, vigorous and diligent, eager to pursue knowledge and attentive to retain it. From his curiosity arose the desire of travelling, which though he never found an opportunity to gratify, it did not leave him till his life declined.”³

To Johnson also may be applied his own description of Barretier : “He had a quickness of apprehension

¹ *Lives of the Poets*, i. 417.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* iii. 417.

CHARACTER IN HIS WRITINGS

and firmness of memory which enabled him to read with incredible rapacity, and at the same time to retain what he read so as to be able to recollect and apply it. He turned over volumes in an instant and selected what was useful for his purpose.”¹ “Did you read it through?” Johnson was sure to ask if a book was praised to him.² “He gets at the substance of a book directly; he tears out the heart of it,” said a friend.³

Light also is thrown on Johnson’s own character in his praise of Milton’s independence of spirit and lofty demeanour in adversity: “He was naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities, and disdainful of help or hindrance: he did not refuse admission to the thoughts or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them. From his contemporaries he neither courted nor received support: There is in his writings nothing by which the pride of other authors might be gratified or favour gained, no exchange of praise or sollicitation of support.”⁴

In his adverse criticism also Johnson shows a very natural tendency to interpret the characters of other poets by their unlikeness to his own. His *Life of Swift*, I think, shows this.

In his last *Rambler* Johnson wrote: “I have never enabled my readers to discuss the topic of the day.” It is not known, I think, when it was that Johnson was drawn to serve in the militia: though we know

¹ *Works*, vi. 390.

² *Boswell*, iii. 226.

³ *Ibid.* iii. 285.

⁴ *Lives of the Poets*, i. 194.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

that Boswell saw hanging in a closet the musket and the sword with which he had provided himself.¹ Perhaps it was at this time that he wrote his paper on the *Bravery of the English Common Soldier*.² If Johnson were living now he would be meeting his friends at supper, we do not doubt. I have wondered though these last few days if he might not have found it less easy to keep to his *Rambler* rule.

Boswell, iv. 319.

² *Works*, vi. 149.

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,
12TH DECEMBER 1919,

BY

L. C. THOMAS



Sir Joshua Reynolds



I ALWAYS think, myself, that Johnson's most striking characteristic was that he attracted to himself, and exacted the homage of, the most eminent men in an age of eminent men ; and in a different way and for different reasons the same may be said of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Three of Johnson's most fervent admirers were, by universal admission, men of genius—Goldsmith, Reynolds, and Burke, and of these I regard Reynolds as Johnson's St. John.

There is nothing essentially attractive about the name "Joshua." I doubt if the favourite or other sons of any of the Brethren bear that name, but it has been borne by two of the most attractive characters in the history of the world. The original Joshua (the son of Nun) was likewise a man of genius and lovable parts, and during the course of the war I am sure we all had constantly in mind the great Israelitish general who, with unshakable faith and breadth of vision, led the armies of the Lord of Hosts to triumphant issues. But even he was unable to

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

invest that name with the charm it derived from its association with his eighteenth-century namesake. Prefixed to "Reynolds" it sounds like a benediction. We feel that no other name would have answered the purpose, and so there stands out prominently in the Johnsonian gallery that personage we all think of as "Sir Joshua."

It is no part of my present purpose to discourse of Reynolds as a painter except incidentally. His position in that respect seems unassailable. All who are qualified to judge are agreed that he was one of the greatest painters of all time. A gentleman of my acquaintance, who is a great authority on arts in general and on Reynolds in particular, once observed to me that the best room in the National Gallery should be cleared and filled with Reynolds's pictures. I suppose that among the great British artists he is an easy first in spite of recent auction sales.

Mr. Austin Dobson in his "Gentlemen of the Old School" conjures up a typical Reynolds portrait :

Reynolds has painted him—a face
Filled with a fine, old-fashioned grace,
Fresh-coloured, frank, with ne'er a trace
Of trouble shaded ;
The eyes are blue, the hair is drest
In plainest way—one hand is prest
Deep in a flapped canary vest,
With buds brocaded.
He wears a brown old Brunswick coat,
With silver buttons—round his throat,
A soft cravat ; in all you note
An elder fashion.

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

We, however, are chiefly indebted to him for his portrait of Johnson, a replica of which hangs in this room ; and I suppose none of us think of the great man without having this picture in his mind's eye.

I maintain that Sir Joshua is even more attractive and interesting as a man than as a painter. Johnson described him as "the most invulnerable man I know : the man with whom if you should quarrel, you would find the most difficulty how to abuse," and in 1764, when Reynolds suffered a short but dangerous illness, Johnson wrote the following letter :

DEAR SIR,

I did not hear of your sickness till I heard likewise of your recovery, and therefore escaped that part of your pain which every man must feel to whom you are known as you are known to me. Having had no particular account of your disorder, I know not in what state it has left you. If the amusement of my company can exhilarate the languor of a slow recovery, I will not delay a day to come to you ; for I know not how I can so effectually promote my own pleasure as by pleasing you ; in whom, if I should lose you, I should lose almost the only man whom I call a friend.

There is also Goldsmith's tribute in his Dedication of *The Deserted Village* to Reynolds, where he says : "The only dedication I ever made was to my brother, because I loved him better than most other men. He is since dead. Permit me to inscribe this poem to you."

It is of interest to recall the circumstances and associations of Sir Joshua's earlier years. He was

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

born, as every one knows, at Plympton in Devonshire, a small market town for ever famous because of its association with this illustrious man. There were two factors in his early history which must have had a profound influence on his career : one was the great natural beauty of the district, and the other the assistance and support afforded him by the neighbouring gentry, an interesting fact when it is remembered that these were country squires of the Fielding period. Any young professional man is all the better for the assistance and encouragement of powerful friends, and these Reynolds had in full measure from the Edgcumbes, Eliots, Parkers, and others who represented the leading country families in his district. I have often gazed with a feeling of veneration amounting almost to affection at portly figures ensconced in comfortable chairs in the Club at Exeter, who bore the same names as those who assisted the young Reynolds at a time when his genius was flowering. It is gratifying to think that had they any desire for fame Reynolds repaid their kindness with compound interest, as their portraits appear at every loan exhibition and their names in every contemporary history.

Sir Joshua's sweetness of disposition seems to have been a distinct heritage from his father, and there are two interesting records which demonstrate this characteristic of Reynolds and its distinct origin. In Leslie's *Life* I find the following : " Mr. William Russell possesses a small pen sketch by Reynolds,

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

washed with Indian ink, of a child leaning on the slab of a tomb, and pointing down to a scroll which lies at his feet, on which is written ‘Humphrey, Samuel, Martin—all, all, are gone’; this in reference to the death of his brothers.” The death of a child is perhaps the most pathetic subject that the human mind can dwell upon. One remembers King David : “I shall go to him but he will not return to me.” The elder Reynolds, on the death of his son Martin, wrote to a friend who was also suffering a domestic bereavement a letter which, to my mind, forms a most touching and charming epitaph on the death of a child. He says : “I shall offer no arguments of consolation to you, who wanted them so much myself, and should still want them, if I did not consider that it is too apparent that all grief in these cases is of no purpose. But one thing I comfort myself with, which is perhaps an argument that you have omitted—that I have enjoyed them for some time, which, notwithstanding the grief of parting from them, is much better than not to have enjoyed them at all ; and I think with pleasure upon some of their actions, which our Saviour points out in children, and which ’tis always good to have before our eyes. They are little preachers of righteousness which grown persons may listen to with pleasure. Actions are more powerful than words ; and I cannot but thank God sometimes for the benefit of their example.”

By means of support of one kind and another, Reynolds was enabled to travel extensively on the

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

continent of Europe and to prosecute his artistic studies in Italy.

At the age of thirty he established himself in London on the urgent representations of his friend and patron Lord Edgcumbe, where he was joined by his youngest sister Frances. This sister seems to have been a tiresome woman apart from what Madam D'Arblay described as her "worth and understanding," and after residing with her brother for some years he was obliged to part company with her, although he otherwise invariably treated her with great kindness, and made an adequate provision for her in his will. With Johnson she was a prime favourite. "My dearest Rennie" he calls her, and she seems to have been one of the few women who were able to satisfy his lust for tea. He considered her as a being "very near to purity itself." She also possessed artistic talent of sorts, which she exercised by painting miniatures and copying her illustrious brother's pictures, of which he remarked: "They make other people laugh and me cry." It will be remembered that Reynolds, having purchased a large gingerbread coach, as was unkindly said for the sake of advertisement, prevailed upon his sister to drive about in it, although he does not seem to have been sufficiently courageous to do so himself.

Reynolds first became acquainted with Johnson when the latter was residing at Gough Square, but they met for the first time at the house of two ladies who were neighbours of Reynolds in Newport Street.

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

At the very first meeting Reynolds delivered himself of an observation which won Johnson's admiration, and which indeed would have appealed to a person of less discernment than Johnson. The ladies mentioned the death of a friend to whom they were under considerable obligations, chiefly, I believe, financial. Reynolds observed : " You have, however, the comfort of being relieved from the burden of gratitude."

The friendship thus commenced continued until it was interrupted by Johnson's death, although at times the courtly Sir Joshua must have found Johnson rather trying. On one occasion Reynolds took the eminent sculptor Roubiliac to Gough Square, in order that the latter might ask Johnson to compose an epitaph for a monument in Westminster Abbey. The meeting seems to have taken place in this very room, and the introduction having been made, Roubiliac revealed the purpose of his visit in flowery language, which was interrupted by Johnson saying : " Come, come, Sir, let us have no more of this bombastic, ridiculous rodomontade, but let me know in simple language the name, character, and quality of the person whose epitaph you intend to have me write."

Differences arose from time to time between Johnson and Reynolds on the subject of alcoholic refreshment, the attitude of Johnson towards it being what would now be described as of a " pussyfoot " character. Reynolds said : " I am in very good spirits when I get up in the morning. By dinner-time I am exhausted.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Wine puts me in the same state as when I got up." On one occasion Johnson wrote to Boswell, "Reynolds has taken too much strong liquor, and seems to delight in his new character." The subject often recurred between them, and on one of these occasions Reynolds inflicted on Johnson a snub, which I believe is the only recorded instance of a snub which was answered by an apology. Reynolds, arguing in favour of wine-drinking, remarked that : "To please one's company was a strong motive," whereupon Johnson replied : "I don't agree with you, Sir ; you are too far gone," to which Sir Joshua replied : "I should have thought so indeed, Sir, had I made such a speech as you have done." Johnson (as Boswell records "drawing himself in," and I really believe flushing) : "Nay, don't be angry, I did not mean to offend you."

In the year 1762 Sir Joshua achieved an ambition, which, like Boswell, he had entertained, by taking Johnson on a tour in his native county, to be shown off to his host's friends. While visiting the Mudges at Exeter there occurred an incident which seems to have impressed itself on Johnson's memory. On passing his cup to Mrs. Mudge for the eighteenth time, that lady remarked, "What another, Dr. Johnson ?" "Madam, you are rude," replied Johnson, and went steadily on till he had finished his twenty-fifth cup. Johnson referred to this upon an occasion when he and Reynolds were at Mrs. Cumberland's. Sir Joshua gently called his attention to the fact that he had had eleven cups of tea, to which Johnson replied :

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

"Sir, I did not count your glasses of wine, why should you number up my cups of tea?" He then told his visitors of the incident at Mrs. Mudge's, who, he complained, desired "to make a zany" of him. The genial Cumberland said, "My wife would have made tea for him as long as the New River could have supplied her with water."

It appears that during this excursion Johnson alarmed those who were entertaining him by his excesses in honey, cider, and clotted cream, but seems to have been none the worse for them. He is reputed to have raced "a young lady on the lawn at one of the Devonshire houses, kicking off his tight slippers high into the air as he ran, and when he had won, leading the lady back in triumphant delight." While at Plymouth, finding that a rivalry existed between that town and the neighbouring town of Devonport, he immediately developed a violent partisan attitude, contemptuously referring to the inhabitants of Devonport as "The Dockers," and when the "Dockers" petitioned that a portion of Plymouth's plentiful supply of water should be diverted to them for their urgent needs, Johnson exclaimed: "No, no! I am a Plymouth man. Rogues! Let them die of thirst. They shall not have a drop!"

Sir Joshua saw every turn of the brilliant social kaleidoscope of his period. Day after day the most distinguished men and the most celebrated and beautiful women were to be found in his studio. On one occasion when a friend expressed to him his wonder

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

that he could resist the alluring beauty of some of his sitters he replied that his heart, like the gravedigger's hand in *Hamlet*, had grown callous by contact with beauty. I have not attempted to pry into Reynolds's relations with his fair sitters, but he seems to have had a certain aloofness which may have protected him like armour. Miss Thrale could never really understand him, as is indicated by the following vivacious lines composed by her :

Of Reynolds all good should be said and no harm,
Though the heart is too frigid, the pencil too warm ;
Yet each fault from his converse we still must disclaim,
As his temper 'tis peaceful and pure as his fame ;
Nothing in it o'erflows, nothing ever is wanting.
It nor chills like his kindness, nor glows like his painting.
When Johnson by strength overpowers our mind,
When Montague dazzles, and Burke strikes us blind,
To Reynolds well pleased for relief we must run,
Rejoice in his shadow and shrink from the sun.

He was equally at home in the glare and glitter of the Pantheon as in the murk of Gough Square, and he studied at first hand that social life, the constituent parts of which he portrayed on his canvas. He was present at the opening of the Pantheon, an institution which the proprietors intended to conduct with perfect propriety, even requiring, if necessary, the production of marriage certificates from the ladies who attended.

Johnson himself attended the Pantheon, the fee for admission to which was half a guinea. On this Boswell remarked that there was not half-a-

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

guinea's worth of pleasure in seeing the place. "But, Sir," said Johnson, "there's half-a-guinea's worth of inferiority to other people in not having seen it."

During the course of his career Sir Joshua seems to have painted almost everybody of any importance. The beautiful Miss Gunnings, soldiers, sailors, bucks, macaronis, ladies frail and fair. A favourite sitter was Kitty Fisher, who was painted by him no less than seven times. This was an interesting lady who eventually died of "cosmetics." She was said to have been *kept* by subscription of the whole club at Arthur's, but apart from her beauty she has been described as "a very agreeable, genteel person, the essence of small talk and the magazine of contemporary anecdote." Lord Lingonier described her in conjunction with a friend as two *ladies of genuine pleasure*, with whom he acknowledges to have passed some of the merriest hours of his life. She is reported to have got through £12,000 in nine months, which period one thinks might have been employed much more profitably.

Goldsmith, in his dedication of *The Deserted Village*, has referred to Sir Joshua's literary discernment. As exemplifying this, I cannot resist the temptation of quoting from *The Dialogues* composed by Reynolds of a conversation between himself and Johnson. These dialogues were written, I believe, with no view to publication. Of them, Hannah More, who knew the parties well, said, "Dear Sir Joshua, even with his inimitable pencil, never drew more interesting,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

more resembling portraits. . . . I hear the deep-toned and indignant accents of our friend Johnson . . . the natural, the easy, the friendly, the elegant language, the polished sarcasm, softened with sweet temper, of Sir Joshua."

REYNOLDS. Let me alone, I'll bring him out. (*Aside.*) I have been thinking, Dr. Johnson, this morning, on a matter that has puzzled me very much ; it is a subject that I dare say has often passed in your thoughts, and though *I* cannot, I dare say *you* have made up your mind upon it.

JOHNSON. Tilly fally ! What is all this preparation ? What is all this mighty matter ?

REYNOLDS. Why, it is a very weighty matter. The subject I have been thinking upon is Predestination and Free-will, two things I cannot reconcile together for the life of me ; in my opinion, Dr. Johnson, free-will and foreknowledge cannot be reconciled.

JOHNSON. Sir, it is not of very great importance what your opinion is upon such a question.

REYNOLDS. But I meant only, Dr. Johnson, to know your opinion.

JOHNSON. No, Sir, you meant no such thing ; you meant only to show these gentlemen that you are not the man they took you to be, but that you think of high matters sometimes, and that you may have the credit of having it said that you held an argument with Sam Johnson on predestination and free-will—a subject of that magnitude as to have engaged the attention of the world, to have perplexed the wisdom of man for these two thousand years ; a subject on which the fallen angels, who *had yet not lost all their original brightness*, find themselves in *wandering mazes lost*. That such a subject could be discussed in the levity of convivial conversation, is a degree of absurdity beyond what is easily conceivable.

REYNOLDS. It is so, as you say, to be sure ; I talked once to our friend Garrick upon this subject, but I remember we could make nothing of it.

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

JOHNSON. O noble pair!

REYNOLDS. Garrick was a clever fellow, Dr. Johnson; Garrick, take him altogether, was certainly a very great man.

JOHNSON. Garrick, Sir, may be a great man in your opinion, as far as I know, but he was not so in mine; little things are great to little men.

REYNOLDS. I have heard you say, Dr. Johnson——

JOHNSON. Sir, you have never heard me say that David Garrick was a great man; you may have heard me say that Garrick was a good repeater—of other men's words—words put into his mouth by other men; this makes but a faint approach towards being a great man.

REYNOLDS. But take Garrick upon the whole, now, in regard to conversation——

JOHNSON. Well, Sir, in regard to conversation: I never discovered in the conversation of David Garrick any intellectual energy, any wide grasp of thought, any extensive comprehension of mind, or that he possessed any of these powers to which *great* could with any degree of propriety be applied——

REYNOLDS. But still——

JOHNSON. Hold, Sir, I have not done. There are, to be sure, in the laxity of colloquial speech, various kinds of greatness; a man may be a great tobacconist, a man may be a great painter, he may be likewise a great mimic; now you may be the one and Garrick the other, and yet neither of you be great men.

REYNOLDS. But, Dr. Johnson——

JOHNSON. Hold, Sir, I have often lamented how dangerous it is to investigate and discriminate character, to men who have no discriminative powers.

REYNOLDS. But Garrick, as a companion, I heard you say—no longer ago than last Wednesday, at Mrs. Thrale's table——

JOHNSON. You tease me, Sir. Whatever you may have heard me say, no longer ago than last Wednesday, at Mrs. Thrale's table, I tell you I do not say so now; besides, as I said before, you may not have understood

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

me, you misapprehended me, you may not have heard me.

REYNOLDS. But I am very sure I heard you.

JOHNSON. Besides, besides, Sir, besides—do you not know—are you so ignorant as not to know—that it is the highest degree of rudeness to quote a man against himself?

REYNOLDS. But if you differ from yourself, and give one opinion to-day—

JOHNSON. Have done, Sir; the company you see are tired, as well as myself.

Volumes might be written about the details of Sir Joshua's career, which was one of considerable prosperity, but towards its end he must have felt acutely the loss of many of his great friends. Having always suffered from deafness, when he reached the age of sixty-six he was further handicapped by an impairment of vision which made him afraid to paint, read, or write, and he amused himself by cleaning and mending pictures and playing cards; while the tediums of inaction was to some extent relieved by Ozias Humphrey reading to him from the newspapers accounts of the French Revolution. As the child is the father of the man, one can imagine him in this twilight mourning, as at an earlier period he had lamented the death of his little brothers, the loss of his friends: "Johnson, Goldsmith, Garrick—all, all are gone."

He had none of Johnson's morbid dread of death. On 26th January 1792 Burke writes to his son Richard: "Our poor friend Sir Joshua declines daily. For some time past he has kept his bed . . . nothing

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

can equal the tranquillity with which he views his end. He congratulates himself on it as a happy conclusion of a happy life." He died with little pain on Thursday evening, 23rd February.

When I contemplate Reynolds's character, I am reminded of an excogitation of the Pope in "The Ring and the Book" :

I see in the world the intellect of man everywhere—
That sword, the energy, his subtle spear,
The knowledge which defends him like a shield—
Everywhere; but they make not up, I think,
The marvel of a soul like thine. . . .

Never was a man so kind and liberal to his friends as Reynolds, his benevolence towards whom was exercised with a thoughtful particularity. He founded the Club to give Johnson undisturbed opportunities of talking. On the formation of the Royal Academy, he suggested to the King the appointment of a few honorary members, and it is not surprising to find among these the following appointments :

Professor of Ancient Literature : Dr. Johnson.

Professor of Ancient History : Dr. Goldsmith,

of which appointment poor Goldy remarked that honours to a man like himself "were like ruffles to a man who had no shirt." He gave Goldsmith financial assistance in his darkest days, and even after his death assisted his protégés. He lent Burke £2,000, from which obligation he released him in his will, as well as bequeathing an extra £2,000; and he also, as is well known, lent money to Johnson.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

None of these ever seem to have repaid him. Johnson asked to be released from a small debt, as he desired to divert the money into what he considered a necessitous quarter, as excellent an example of the definition of *charity* I can remember having heard : "A strong desire on the part of A to benefit B at the expense of C."

The world owes a great debt of gratitude to Sir Joshua for having befriended these great men. He relieved the lofty mind of Burke from the cloud of financial embarrassment ; he was instrumental in procuring Johnson's pension ; and he was like a fairy godmother to Goldsmith. His remains were deposited with pomp and circumstance in St. Paul's Cathedral.

Had there been observed at the side of his tomb something approaching the conventional valedictory salutation pronounced by Garter King-of-Arms at the burial of a knight of that Order, it might well have been said : "Thus it hath pleased Almighty God to take from this transitory world into his mercy that great painter and great and good man Sir Joshua Reynolds."

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,
17TH JANUARY 1919,

BY

A. B. WALKLEY



Johnson and the Theatre



BOSWELL'S chronicle of Johnson as a playgoer is fragmentary. The direct evidence has often to be supplemented by inference and not seldom by conjecture ; with some further help from that precious privilege which Renan claimed for every historian, the privilege *de solliciter doucement les textes*, of gently coaxing the text. It is sufficiently clear, however, that Johnson must have been a playgoer, off and on, for over two score years. "Forty years ago, Sir," he said to Boswell when revisiting Lichfield in 1776, "I was in love with an actress here, Mrs. Emmet, who acted Flora in *Hob in the Well*." "What merit," says Boswell, "this lady had as an actress, or what was her figure or her manner, I have not been informed, but, if we may believe Mr. Garrick, his old master's taste in theatrical merit was by no means refined ; he was not an *elegans formarum spectator*. Garrick used to tell that Johnson said of an actor, who played Sir Harry Wildair at Lichfield, 'There is a courtly vivacity about the fellow,' when,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

in fact, according to Garrick's account, 'he was the most vulgar ruffian that ever went upon boards.'” “Forty years ago” in 1776—it must have been a little more than that, for by 1735 Johnson was a married man. In this early version of *Pendennis* and the *Fotheringay* the dates are significant. Then, as now, travelling companies—almost of necessity—followed the London lead. Now *Hob* had been revived at Covent Garden on 22nd March, and it is virtually certain that the Lichfield performance was after that date. Johnson married Mrs. Porter on 9th July. Quick work! Two successive passions—if they did not overlap—in about as many months! As to *Sir Harry Wildair*, there was an isolated revival in London, after many years, on 1st February 1737. It must have been in the course of the following summer, when Johnson temporarily returned to Lichfield after his first visit to London, that he saw this play. And it must have been some time earlier that he tossed the Lichfield man, who had taken his playhouse chair, into the pit, chair and all.

For the next ten years there is a gap in the record of Johnson's playgoing. They were years of dire poverty, and the price of a seat in the pit, three shillings, must have been a serious matter for him. But for the first half of this period he was intimate with Savage, whom he describes in the *Life* as “an assiduous frequenter of the theatres.” In the *Life* he speaks of the players, and what he says cannot have been said from hearsay. In 1741 his friend Garrick leapt

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

into fame, and, of course, had "paper" to bestow. And Johnson had come up from Lichfield with a manuscript tragedy, *Mahomet and Irene*. Period : shortly after the capture of Constantinople in 1453 by Mahomet II. To write it Johnson borrowed from Peter Garrick Knolles's *History of the Turks* ; but for the modern inquirer Gibbon is a more accessible authority, and Gibbon's reference to the matter is, if brief, characteristic : "I will not transcribe, nor do I firmly believe, the story of the beauteous slave, whose head Mahomet severed from her body to convince the janizaries that their master was not the votary of love." Mahomet's action would hardly convince any one to-day, when a severed head, far from damming the course of true love, has proved on the stage the most potent of aphrodisiacs. However, when the beauteous slave became Johnson's Irene, strangling was substituted for decapitation, and—it is said at Garrick's suggestion—in view of the audience. But you never can tell how audiences will take a bowstring. One remembers that when Sarah Bernhardt bared her neck to it in the last act of *Théodora* the curtain was dropped with nervous precipitation. The audience at Drury Lane in 1749 made a joke of it. "When Mrs. Pritchard was to be strangled upon the stage, and was to speak two lines with the bowstring round her neck, the audience cried out 'Murder ! Murder !' She several times attempted to speak, but in vain. At last she was obliged to go off the stage alive." On subsequent

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

nights—there were nine in all—she was strangled “off.” She was strangled, not because Mahomet wished to convince any one that he was not the votary of love, but because he believed her, erroneously, to be involved in a palace conspiracy led by his Grand Vizier. Indeed, he had been on the point of marrying her, after persuading her to change her religion. Only a few intrepid explorers now read *Irene* through. Other people may plead what Johnson said about Mrs. Montague’s Essay on Shakespeare. “. . . I have, indeed, not read it all. But when I take up the end of a web, and find it pack-thread, I do not expect, by looking further, to find embroidery.” Boswell gives some extracts, Birkbeck Hill some more, and there are several speeches in the Johnsoniana appended to the charming revised and illustrated Croker of 1835—all good, stout pack-thread. Evidently the narrator of *The Rose and the Ring*, who made the famous observation that blank verse is not argument, had never read *Irene*. At the best it is an intellectual effort, the vigorous expression of concepts; whereas a work of art—be it tragedy or comedy, epic or lyric, picture or symphony—must, of course, be primarily the expression, not of concepts, but of intuitions. When Garrick told Boswell that Johnson lacked “sensibility,” he signified the same thing in the language of his time. Boswell, who, we all know, is sometimes capable of a surprisingly acute piece of criticism, draws attention to the likeness between Johnson’s mental character and that which

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

he assigns to Dryden : “The power,” says Johnson, “that predominated in (Dryden’s) intellectual operations was rather strong reason than quick sensibility. Upon all occasions that were presented, he studied rather than felt ; and produced sentiments, not such as nature enforces, but meditation supplies.” There is the explanation of *Irene* in a nutshell.

Its form is strictly on the classical model ; given its date, what else could it be ? The great French tragedians of an earlier generation had firmly established that. Racine’s *Bajazet* is very similar in theme to *Irene* : or Oriental palace conspiracy (with the dagger—used “off”—characteristically substituted for the bowstring). Both rely exclusively upon dialogue, forensic or descriptive, and “local colour” is non-existent. What Corneille is reported to have said of *Bajazet*—that its people were not Turks, but the author’s countrymen—is equally true of *Irene*. Indeed, one of its most telling speeches was a eulogy by the Vizier (in 1453) of the British Constitution. This reminds one of Mr. Bernard Shaw’s *Man of Destiny*, wherein Bonaparte, at a Lombard inn, after the battle of Lodi, lectures a French spy on the adulteration of Manchester goods and the iniquity of child labour under the English factory system. Of course, Johnson went to the East because the tragedians of that age turned to the East as persistently as many of the novelists of our own turn to the East End. If the story of *Irene* were treated by a modern dramatist—and it is not a

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

bad story—it would be handled romantically. Sardou or D’Annunzio would certainly have restored the decapitation and “revelled in gore.” Imagine Rostand’s riot of “local colour” in prodigies of rhyme—the yhatagans and yashmaks and narghilies and minarets and muezzins and Allah ! Allahs ! It would make a capital Russian ballet : a pendant, say, to *Schéhérazade*.

But why did Johnson choose tragedy ?

Because it was in the air ; everybody was doing it. Tragedy had fallen into the imitative stage. It had perfected the most elaborate machinery ; but the boiler was out. Addison’s *Cato* set everybody ransacking their Roman History or their Knolles—peers, clergymen, schoolmasters, bluestockings. Garrick was plagued to death with them. To Moncrief, author of an *Appius and Virginia*, Garrick said Virginia was killed too early, and the fifth act only consisted in talking this catastrophe over. “Well,” replied the author, “and if such a thing had happened at Charing Cross, don’t you think that all the coffee-houses in London would have been full of it ?” Johnson himself was a victim. A Mrs. B., according to Hannah More, asked Johnson “to look over her *Siege of Sinope*.” He recommended her to look over it herself. “But, Sir,” said she, “I have no time. I have already so many irons in the fire.” “Why, then, Madam,” said he, “the best thing I can advise you to do is to put your tragedy along with your irons.” Talking to Henderson,

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

the actor, he said of a certain dramatic writer : “ I never did the man an injury, but he would persist in reading his tragedy to me.” Evidently no one stopped to consider if he had any natural vocation for tragic drama. Johnson himself certainly did not. Indeed, he expressly denied that there was any such thing as natural vocation. In Boswell’s *Tour to the Hebrides*, there is a conversation at Edinburgh between Johnson and Robertson. Johnson said he could not understand how a man could apply to one thing and not to another. Robertson said one man had more judgment, another more imagination.

JOHNSON. No, Sir ; it is only, one man has more mind than another. He may direct it differently ; he may by accident see the success of one kind of study and take a desire to excel in it. I am persuaded that, had Sir Isaac Newton applied to poetry, he would have made a very fine epic poem. I could as easily apply to law as to tragic poetry.

BOSWELL. Yet, Sir, you did apply to tragic poetry, not to law.

JOHNSON. Because, Sir, I had not money to study law.

Not that every one who had money to study law could be kept off tragedy. There was Boswell himself. True, though probably by a mere fluke, we have no tragedy from his pen, but we have *An Ode to Tragedy*. It was published anonymously “ By a Gentleman of Scotland,” with a dedication to James Boswell, Esq., which winds up with : “ I, Sir, who enjoy the pleasure of your intimate acquaintance, know that many of your hours of retirement are devoted to thought.”

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

Boswell's choice of subject testifies to the overwhelming vogue of tragedy.

In 1742, some seven years before Garrick brought out *Irene*, Johnson appears to have been meditating another play, *Charles of Sweden*, but it came to naught. After his failure he said he felt like the monument, but the subsequent records do not show him as conspicuously monumental. Langton mentions that, years later, when his *Irene* was being read to a company at a house in the country, he left the room ; and, somebody having asked him the reason of this, he replied : " Sir, I thought it had been better." Scott's story of one Pot's eulogy of *Irene*, with Johnson's comment, " If Pot says so, Pot lies," lacks authentication. But at Mrs. Thrale's in 1778 Johnson, by request, read several speeches, and said he had never read so much of it before since it was first printed. And yet from the same authority we have it that "*Irene* was a violent favourite with him ; and much was he offended when, having asked me once, ' What single scene afforded me most pleasure of all in our tragic drama ? ' I, little thinking of *his* play's existence, named the dialogue between Syphax and Juba in Addison's *Cato*. ' Nay, nay,' replied he, ' if you are for declamation, I hope *my* two ladies (i.e. *Irene* and her confidant) have the better of them all.' "

To return to the playgoer. Boswell tells us how on his own first night, Johnson appeared behind the scenes, and even in one of the side boxes, in a scarlet waistcoat, with rich gold lace, and a gold-laced hat ;

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

how his attendance at rehearsals brought him better acquainted with the players ; how he kept up his acquaintance with some of them all his life and was ever ready to show them acts of kindness ; how for a considerable time he used to frequent the Green Room, and seemed to take a delight in dissipating his gloom by mixing in the sprightly chit-chat of the motley circle then to be found there ; how, according to Garrick, as reported by Hume, Johnson “ at last denied himself this amusement from considerations of rigid virtue, saying : ‘ I’ll come no more behind your scenes, David, for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities.’ ” It has been said that there is another version of Garrick’s Green Room story, reported this time by Wilkes, which makes Johnson’s language so indecent as to be unfit for publication. Dr. Hill thinks the indecency was probably Wilkes’ own, and reminds us of Johnson’s proud claim that “ obscenity had always been repressed in his company.” A devil’s advocate might retort that Swift—of all men—made the same claim. As to the “ considerable time ” for which Johnson frequented the Green Room, we are carried on at least to 1756—the year of Garrick’s first appearance in *The Wonder*—by Johnson’s anecdote, told to Langton, about his meeting Garrick coming off the stage in that play ; and to 1758 by a letter of Johnson’s to Langton mentioning that he was at the first night of Dodsley’s *Cleone*. That Johnson was still going behind the scenes is

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

shown by a story of Mrs. Bellamy about the last rehearsal of this play. "When I came to repeat 'Thou shalt not murder,' Dr. Johnson caught me by the arm, and that somewhat too briskly, saying at the same time, 'It is a commandment, and must be spoken, "Thou shalt *not* murder."'" Further, there is the anecdote about Mrs. Clive. Johnson said to Langton : "Clive, Sir, is a good thing to sit by ; she always understands what you say." And she said of him : "I love to sit by Dr. Johnson ; he always entertains me." This is coupled, in Langton's memoranda, with Johnson's commendation of Farquhar "one night when *The Recruiting Officer* was acted." Now Farquhar's play had been revived just before the production of *Cleone*.

There must just now have been some slackening in Johnson's playgoing (and perhaps it was at this time that the "white bosoms" drove him away)—although he was certainly at *High Life Below Stairs* (in 1759), as he compares its reading with its acting qualities—for in 1761 you have him writing to Baretti : "The only change in my way of life is that I have frequented the theatre more than in former seasons. But I have gone thither only to escape from myself. We have had many new farces, and the comedy called *The Jealous Wife*." This had been produced some four months before the date of Johnson's letter.

But he was now over fifty ; in the next year he got his pension ; in 1763 he met Boswell ; the Literary Club was founded that winter ; and in 1764 or 1765

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

(Boswell and Mrs. Piozzi differ about the date) he became intimate with the Thrales. These are all good reasons—as pointing to other avenues of escape from himself—for expecting Johnson to relinquish, not merely Green Room haunting, but regular play-going, and early in 1766 the expectation is confirmed by a conversation between Johnson and Goldsmith.

GOLDSMITH. I think, Mr. Johnson, you don't go near the theatres now. You give yourself no more concern about a new play than if you had never had anything to do with the stage.

JOHNSON. Why, Sir, our tastes greatly alter. The lad does not care for the child's rattle, and the old man does not care for the young man's whore.

GOLDSMITH. Nay, Sir, but your muse was not a whore.

JOHNSON. Sir, I do not think she was. But as we advance in the journey of life, we drop some of the things which have pleased us; whether it be that we are fatigued and don't choose to carry so many things any farther, or that we find other things which we like better.

Henceforward, only the strongest claims of friendship could drag Johnson to the theatre, and his visits became rare. A couple of years after the conversation just quoted he wrote the prologue for Goldsmith's *Good Natured Man*, saw the play, and praised it warmly. He was at the first night of *She Stoops to Conquer* (which he also praised enthusiastically) in 1773. It "was to be represented during some Court mourning, and Mr. Steevens appointed to call on Dr. Johnson and carry him to the tavern where he was to dine with others of the poet's friends. The Doctor was ready dressed, but in coloured clothes ;

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

yet being told that he would find every one else in black, received the intelligence with a profusion of thanks, and hastened to change his attire, all the while repeating his gratitude for the information that had saved him from an appearance so improper in the front row of a front box. 'I would not,' added he, 'for ten pounds have seemed so retrograde to any general observance.' " Another two years pass and he is at Mrs. Abingdon's benefit. She had pressed him to come. She had also pressed Sir Joshua Reynolds to bring a body of wits, and this distinguished *claque* occupied forty seats in the front boxes. "Johnson," says Boswell, "sat on the seat directly behind me; and as he could neither see nor hear at such a distance from the stage, he was wrapped up in grave abstraction, and seemed quite a cloud amidst all the sunshine of glitter and gaiety." Boswell afterwards "rallied" him. "Why, Sir, did you go to Mrs. Abingdon's benefit? Did you see?"

JOHNSON. No, Sir.

BOSWELL. Did you hear?

JOHNSON. No, Sir.

BOSWELL. Why, then, Sir, did you go?

JOHNSON. Because, Sir, she is a favourite of the public, and when the public cares the thousandth part for you that it does for her, I will go to your benefit too.

When proposing Sheridan for the Literary Club in March 1777, Johnson said he had written the two best comedies of his age. These, as Dr. Hill points out, must have been *The Rivals* and—not *The School*

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

for *Scandal*, but—*The Duenna*. The last certain record of Johnson at the play is dated 25th March 1776, when he and Boswell were visiting Lichfield. The manager of a travelling company had called and solicited his patronage. “In the evening we went to the Town Hall, which was converted into a temporary theatre, and saw *Theodosius*, with the *Stratford Jubilee*. I was happy to see Dr. Johnson sitting in a conspicuous part of the pit and receiving affectionate homage from all his acquaintances. We were quite gay and merry.” In October 1783 you have the famous visit of Mrs. Siddons, and Johnson’s saying with a smile, as there happened to be no chair ready : “Madam, you who so often occasion a want of seats to other people, will the more easily excuse the want of one yourself.” Mrs. Siddons thought Queen Katharine in *Henry VIII* the most natural of Shakespeare’s characters. “I think so too, Madam, and whenever you perform it I will once more hobble out to the theatre myself.” She promised to play it for him, but the project fell through ; and by the end of the next year Johnson was dead.

Mrs. Siddons’s visit had prompted Johnson to reminiscences of famous players he had seen. They may be supplemented by those he gave the company at Fort St. George on his Highland tour ten years earlier, but even so are rather meagre, and compare ill, for instance, with Horace Walpole’s. There was Mrs. Porter, unequalled in the vehemence of rage ; and Kitty Clive, in sprightliness of humour. Clive,

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

indeed, was the best player he ever saw. There was Mrs. Pritchard, whom, as his Irene, he had had peculiar opportunities for studying. It was wonderful what little mind she had ; she had never read any more of *Macbeth* than her own part ; in common life she was a vulgar idiot, who talked of her “gownd,” yet on the stage seemed inspired by gentility and understanding, though somewhat affected in her manner. Colley Cibber he found in conversation ignorant of the principles of his art. (Yet Cibber’s *Apology* abounds in sound histrionic principles, and his reminiscences of actors are far more illuminating than Johnson’s.) Garrick was no declaimer ; yet the only actor he ever saw to be called a master in both tragedy and comedy, though he liked him best in comedy. A true conception of character and natural expression of it were his distinguishing excellences. And he could represent all modes of life except a fine gentleman—a reservation in which Horace Walpole, a higher authority on the point, agreed with Johnson. Yet about that naturalness of Garrick it is permissible to doubt whether Johnson grasped the distinction between the natural in art and the natural in life. As Boswell points out, he was of a directly contrary opinion to that of Fielding, where Partridge was absolutely deceived by the naturalness of Garrick’s Hamlet. Boswell asking : “Would you not, Sir, start as Mr. Garrick does if you saw a ghost ?” he answered : “I hope not ; if I did, I should frighten the ghost.”

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

This was to ignore the "optics of the theatre." Johnson, indeed, always tended (the criticism on *Lycidas* is the notorious instance) to confuse judgment of reality with the æsthetic judgment. Was it not, perhaps, this tendency that distorted his views of the actor's art, which he dismissed in terms of ludicrously exaggerated contempt? The player was "a fellow who exhibits himself for a shilling," "a fellow who claps a hump on his back and a hump on his leg and cries, 'I am Richard the Third'" ; a ballad-singer was a higher man, for he repeats and he sings, whereas a player only recites ; players were "no better than creatures set upon tables and joint-stools to make faces and produce laughter, like dancing dogs."

Boswell attributes this prejudice to three causes : "First, the imperfection of his organs, which were so defective that he was not susceptible of the fine impressions which theatrical excellence produces upon the generality of mankind ; secondly, the cold rejection of his tragedy ; and, lastly, the brilliant success of Garrick, who had been his pupil, who had come to London at the same time with him, not in a much more prosperous state than himself, and whose talents he undoubtedly rated low, compared with his own." This would be a damaging explanation were it not incredible. Johnson's infirmity of sight and hearing is obviously irrelevant. It might affect his appreciation of the fine shades of acting. But he raised the previous question : what acting essentially

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

is. He recorded his opinion of actors years before the rejection of *Irene*. That he was moved by jealous envy of Garrick's success is utterly out of keeping with his character and with the generous praise he bestowed on Garrick, not only as an actor, but as a man. He felt Garrick to be over-praised, and he *was* over-praised. Johnson, like every other sensible man, protested against the absurd follies of the stage-struck.

But we in our turn shall be absurd if we think of prejudice against players as being peculiarly Johnsonian. It is as old as Imperial Rome, as far-flung as the Catholic Church. Crudely put, it is that to make a public show of yourself for money, to be always expressing ideas not your own, and emotions that you do not spontaneously feel, to pretend, in short, to be what you are not—"to clap a hump on your back and call yourself Richard III"—is not without its risks for your dignity as a citizen and a free man. *All* imitative artists, it may be said, are speaking in the persons of others, so that the dramatist, the novelist, the painter, are all tarred with the same brush as the player. Many people in the world's history have thought that, from Plato, with his objection to "Mimesis" in general, down to our own Puritans and Methodists. But there is this important difference—that the player is his own artistic medium, his own materials, his own paint and canvas, his own ink and paper. It might be argued that this gives a certain psychological warrant for a

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

prejudice at first sight merely philistine. Darwin says¹ that the simulation of an emotion tends to arouse it in our minds. It is indeed a matter of common observation. Johnson's great friend, Burke, notes in his essay on "The Sublime and Beautiful": "I have often observed that on mimicking the looks and gestures of angry or placid or frightened or daring men, I have involuntarily found my mind turned to that passion whose appearance I endeavoured to imitate." Edgar Poe makes a detective divine the thoughts of suspects in the same way. The theory, presumably, would be that, the player living in a state of artificially excited emotion, his capacity for genuine feeling off the stage tends to be affected—much as the character is said to be affected in hypnotic patients who exhibit emotions under external suggestion. The actor's emotional system, like his face—and Johnson made this remark about Garrick's face—suffers from exceptional wear and tear.

The prejudice, then, assumes the view that the player's art, however slightly, tends to warp the temperament. Certainly, we must all of us have at least heard or read of that particular foible which the French call *cabotinage*—the importation into real life of the airs and postures of the stage. It was one of the "diseases of occupations," like clergyman's sore throat or housemaid's knee, which attacked the weaker brethren,

¹ *The Expression of the Emotions*, 1872, p. 366.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

though even of Garrick you have Goldsmith's line :

'Twas only that when he was off he was acting.

Now Johnson hated, not merely posing, but ordinary emphatic gesture. "Don't attitudinize," he roared at somebody.

Those who cling to the prejudice against players ought to remember this : that plays are made to be played. If you are to admit drama at all among the arts, you must accept its artists. Indeed, it might be urged that they alone not only devote to their art their intelligence and their imagination, as writers do, but immolate their very persons. They are entitled, these martyrs, to all our indulgence. The true lover of human nature, able to find amusement in its little weaknesses and humbly aware that he himself is bound, consciously or not, to be a contributor to that "public stock of harmless pleasure," can never have willingly missed the foibles of the actor. It must have been mainly because Boswell enjoyed them a little too demonstratively—indeed, shared them (one remembers the histrionic zany he made of himself at the Stratford Jubilee)—that Johnson was provoked to come down so heavily on the other side.

The actual foibles of the actor seem at first sight the very reverse of what they were in Johnson's day. *Cabotinage* has given place to *camouflage*. If our modern actors have a weakness, it is for sedulously

JOHNSON AND THE THEATRE

obliterating all their professional marks. They generally contrive to behave just like other people, only, perhaps, with a little more reserve. Indeed, the player often assumes the high seriousness (and sometimes, it is understood, actually fills the respectable office) of a churchwarden. Seldom does he show the *stigmata* of his profession as plainly as the soldier, the barrister, the stockbroker, or the physician. But, as Johnson said of a certain prelate, a fallible being will fail somewhere. Ask an actor to repeat a conversation and he will dramatize it ; to describe an acquaintance and he will mimic him. And so the lover of human nature once more comes by his own.



*JOHNSON'S MONUMENT AND
PARR'S EPITAPH ON JOHNSON*

PAPER READ TO THE JOHNSON CLUB,

16TH MARCH 1916,

BY

HENRY B. WHEATLEY, D.C.L., F.S.A.



Johnson's Monument and Parr's Epitaph on Johnson



BOSWELL'S account of the arrangement for the Memorial statue in St. Paul's, and his remarks respecting Samuel Parr's Epitaph are incomplete, for the very good reason that the monument was not set up until after his death. He did not survive the publication of his great work more than five years, and during the larger portion of that short period he was in failing health. Dr. Birkbeck Hill added further particulars, but he did not enter very fully into the matter, and we cannot expect him to have done so. At the same time a full statement of what occurred is instructive, and of interest as involving the action of many celebrated men.

The business of collecting subscriptions was badly arranged, and the delay in carrying out the object of the Committee amounted almost to a scandal. Difference of opinion was rampant, and there were many dissensions before the proceedings were concluded.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

I am able to bring before you some fresh information respecting both the subjects named in the title of my paper, but I propose to keep the two distinct, as we shall thus get a clearer idea of the somewhat irritating action of Dr. Samuel Parr, in respect to his two proposals, viz. the writing of a Life of Johnson and the composition of a Latin inscription for Bacon's statue.

Parr seems, early in his intercourse with Johnson, to have meditated the writing of a Life of him on a large scale. He wrote :

For many years I spent a month's holiday in London, and never failed to call upon Johnson. I was not only admitted, but welcomed. I conversed with him upon numberless subjects of learning, politics, and common life. I traversed the whole compass of his understanding ; and by the acknowledgment of Burke and Reynolds, I distinctly understood the peculiar and transcendent properties of his mighty and virtuous mind. I intended to write his life ; I laid by sixty or seventy books for the purpose of writing it in such a manner as would do no discredit to myself. I intended to spread my thoughts over two volumes quarto, and if I had filled three pages, the rest would have followed. Often have I lamented my ill fortune in not building this monument to the fame of Johnson, and let me not be accused of arrogance when I add my own !

In the Catalogue of his Library (*Bibliotheca Parriana*) there is this further note : " He will ever have to lament that amidst his cares, his sorrows, and his anxiety, he did not write the life of his learned and revered friend " (p. 716).

We see from these words that not a page of Parr's

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

Life of Johnson, which had been arranged in his head so far that he could estimate its size (by the way, just the same as Boswell's *Life*), was ever written. Parr lamented the omission; may we not rejoice that he abandoned his intention of writing what would have been a thoroughly wrong-headed work, if we may judge from his own statement as to what it would be and as to what it would not be?

He said, "It would have contained a view of the Literature of Europe, and would have been the third most learned work that has ever yet appeared." The other two being Bentley on Phalaris and Salmasius (*Saumaise*) on the Hellenistic Language (*De Lingua Hellenistica*)—what it was not to be he describes by ridiculing what is acknowledged to be the chief merit of Boswell's *Life*—"Mine would have been, not the drippings of his lips, but the history of his mind."

William Seward, F.R.S., wrote to Parr on 15th January 1790 :

Should you like to undertake an edition of Dr. Johnson's Works, with his *Life*, and a critique on his writings? The first edition of them is nearly sold, and Mr. Cadell would be glad to have them edited by a scholar and an admirer of poor Johnson. Let me know as soon as possible what you think of my proposal.

I wish, too, you would turn your thoughts upon an epitaph for Johnson's intended monument.

Yours,

W. SEWARD.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

I have not come across Parr's answer to this letter, but it doubtless contained a refusal. His ideas of a Life of Johnson were so grandiose that he was not likely to undertake a smaller compilation attached to an edition of Johnson's complete works. Apparently the booksellers secured the services of Arthur Murphy, whose life is prefixed to the edition of Johnson's Works, 12 vols. 8vo, 1792. An edition of the works in 15 vols. was badly edited by Sir John Hawkins and published 1787-9.

After these remarks upon Samuel Parr's proposed Life of Johnson, we come to the consideration of the monument in St. Paul's.

A small party met at dinner at the house of Sir Joshua Reynolds on the evening of Johnson's funeral (20th December 1784). Among the guests were Burke, Windham, and Philip Metcalfe, M.P. It was supposed by Mr. W. P. Courtney that at this dinner some proposal for a monument was discussed. A committee of six was appointed to collect subscriptions and to make arrangements for the statue. The idea of a statue by Bacon was Reynolds's. Boswell writes in the first edition of his *Life*: "A monument for him [Johnson] in Westminster Abbey was resolved upon soon after his death, and has been supported by a most respectable contribution."

In a letter to Temple, Boswell writes :

"Several of us subscribed five guineas each. Sir Joshua and Metcalfe ten guineas each. We expect that the Bench of Bishops will be liberal, as

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

he [Johnson] was the greatest supporter of the hierarchy."

Reynolds was very anxious to fill the emptiness of St. Paul's with fine monuments, and he was the cause of the change of place for Johnson's statue—Boswell in his second edition added to his former statement—"but the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's, having come to a resolution of admitting monuments there, upon a liberal and magnificent plan, that Cathedral was afterwards fixed on as the place in which a cenotaph should be erected to his memory."

Owing to dissensions and neglect, the scheme was in abeyance for nearly five years; in consequence many of the subscribers were unwilling to pay their subscriptions they had promised. Among Malone's correspondence there are complaints of the backwardness of the members of the Club to pay the amounts nominally subscribed by them."

At last a determined attempt was made to obtain subscriptions and settle up the accounts. Windham records in his Diary that a meeting of Johnson's friends was held at Malone's on 29th November 1789 to discuss the proposed monument. Shortly afterwards a meeting was held at Reynolds's house to "settle as to effectual measures." Another meeting was held at Thomas's Hotel, Dover Street, on 5th January 1790, when it was resolved to continue the scheme for erecting a monument in Westminster Abbey, and a full committee was formed to collect funds. The Committee met twice in March 1791, when it

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

was violently divided on the rival merits of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's—Burke, Windham, and Reynolds were leaders for St. Paul's, Metcalfe and Sir Joseph Banks for the Abbey. At a meeting in April the difficulty was overcome by Reynolds, who undertook, if sufficient money was not subscribed to defray the increased expense of erecting a monument in St. Paul's, to provide the balance, and Bacon was content to erect it on the faith of this promise. The total expense was over £1,000 (Malone, whose authority is high, says £1,100). The cost of a whole-length statue by Bacon was £600, but the payment to him amounted in all to £927 13s., and there were other charges.

Metcalfe's balance sheet seen by Mr. Courtney begins on 16th April 1790 with "cash received from sundries £569 13s." Reynolds induced the Council of the Royal Academy to vote a contribution of one hundred guineas, but subsequently the vote was disallowed by George III. In 1791 the subscriptions included £40 through Samuel Whitbread, £5 5s. from Lord Eliot, £100 from Cadell the publisher, £5 5s. from Dr. Barnard, Bishop of Killaloe, and £21 through Sir William Scott; a subscription of £5 5s. was paid by Sir William Forbes through Boswell in 1792, and £10 10s. apiece came from Bishop Percy and George Steevens. In 1796 Whitbread paid in a further sum of £50 and the daughter of Henry Thrale did the same.

The statue was first opened to public view on the

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

23rd February 1796, but sufficient money had not then been collected, so Burke's widow gave £5 5s. in 1798, and in 1799 Bacon himself contributed four subscriptions amounting to £35 15s.

Philip Metcalfe, M.P. (*b.* 1722, *d.* 1818), whose name I have already mentioned several times, was a great friend and the executor of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and also a friend of Johnson, who was pleased with Metcalfe's "excellent table and animated conversation." Metcalfe was a rich man with a town house in Savile Row (subsequently in Hill Street) and a house in the Old Steyne at Brighton. He was first connected with Johnson as one who signed the round robin to him in favour of an English epitaph for Goldsmith, his name appearing between those of Sheridan and Gibbon (1776). He was one of the mourners who attended the funeral in Westminster Abbey. Mr. Courtney has given an excellent account of Metcalfe and his valuable help as Treasurer of the Monument Fund in his work entitled *Eight Friends of the Great* (1910). Hawkins, Reynolds, and Boswell all died before the monument was finished, and Burke before sufficient contributions were obtained.

This is rather a sad tale of mismanagement and neglect, and should be a warning to those concerned in obtaining funds for a public memorial. The ardent feelings of the many who regret a great loss are apt to cool long before twelve years have expired.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

We can now turn to a relation of the trouble which Dr. Samuel Parr gave to all who were connected with the monument by reason of what I venture to call his ridiculous pedantry and egregious over-estimate of himself. Parr was a man of great learning, with a singular lack of judgment. Having little or no sense of humour, he was continually making himself ridiculous. At the same time he was a formidable opponent, ever ready with a literary rapier as well as a bludgeon. He was often rude, but always good natured. Much of his writing is portentously dull, but some of it is interesting, and his eight thick volumes of *Works* are a drug in the market, but yet much curious matter can be got out of them if you are inclined to seek for it. He had one unforgivable fault—it is almost impossible to read his hand-writing. He was once punished for this fault, for he was going to stay with a friend after a hard day's work and asked for two ——— to be ready for him. The host puzzled over the hieroglyphics for some time, and at last satisfied himself that the missing word was *eggs*, so eggs were prepared. Parr was disappointed for he intended to ask for two lobsters.

I have now to read the copy of an important letter from Parr to Boswell dated 11th December (1791), lent to me some years ago by Brother Tregaskis. I do not think this letter has been printed, and I have not come across an answer by Boswell :

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

DEAR SIR,

By few works has my attention been seized so forcibly, detained so agreeably, and rewarded so fully, as by your late publication. It is copious, without prolixity and splendid without glare; it forms a noble piece of Biography, which, in my judgement, will never disgrace the memory of that man who stands on the highest pinnacle of fame for biographical writing.

Amidst such a multiplicity of facts, and such a variety of subjects, different readers will contend for different rules of selection. The man of vanity will affect to wish for the omission of a tale which he already knows, and the man of curiosity will wish for amplification, because he desires to know more. The Whig will blame you for inserting political opinions which he does not like, and the Tory will blame you for not suppressing those qualifications, by which the vigour of Johnson's understanding and the honesty of his heart controuled the wantonness of dogmatism. But, in my opinion, the best rule is the most comprehensive. Of such a man as Johnson, it is more pleasant to scholars, and more advantageous to the world, for the Biographer to say too much, than too little. Nothing, indeed, has been said by you which some body or other will not approve, and nothing could have been omitted, the absence of which I, for one, should not have regretted. I will therefore commend and thank you for not "sparing your paper," for such were the words of Johnson when he was canvassing in my presence with Dr. Horsley about the life of Newton; and depend upon it, Sir, that Mr. Boswell's memoirs of Dr. Johnson are not among the *chartæ peritineæ*.

Of objections there is no end, and with such an ample stock of character you ought to have no fear of objectors—happy is he who recording so many interesting facts, and so many brilliant conversations, can produce two quarto volumes with excellences so numerous and imperfections so few.

Upon the general merit of your work I have told you my opinion very sincerely, and perhaps I am not

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

very foolish in supposing that you would be glad to know it.

My particular acknowledgments are due to you, not only for the honourable mention you have made of my attainments, but for your spirited defence of my motives in a work, which for obvious reasons, has been abused by those, who at this moment think what I say, and who after the death of a certain prelate, will venture to say for themselves what I have justified them in thinking of him.

But the chief cause for which I trouble you with this letter is, that I may tell all I have to say, and ask what you have to say further, upon a striking passage in the 582nd page of the second volume. Your words are "to compose his epitaph has incited the warmest competition of genius," and as these words express not an opinion, but a fact, I must beg your permission to explore the whole extent of your meaning.

Since the death of Johnson I have, in random conversation, been now and then asked to write his epitaph, and I refused to write it, from a consciousness of the difficulty which must accompany such an attempt. In the course of this year some applications were made to me in a more formal manner, and in a long correspondence with our most respected friend Sir Joshua Reynolds, I stated fully the reasons which deterred me from promising to do, what, for the sake of Johnson, I wished to be done consummately well. My arguments were impartially considered, my conditions were unequivocally admitted, and at last, my objections were completely vanquished. But the passage above mentioned has given me serious alarm. I never meant to triumph over a competitor, and, before the perusal of your book, I never understood that any competition at all existed. I entered upon the station which I now occupy, without a spirit of invasion, I hope to fill it without dishonour, and I am prepared to retreat from it without reluctance. You will not wonder then, that, upon a business of such delicacy, I am solicitous for a little explanation, and if you know any learned man, who either has written Dr. Johnson's epitaph or intends writing it,

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

or has been asked to write it, I beg of you to inform me unreservedly. My time has not been misspent, either in composing the inscription, or in reading those works of antiquity which alone could enable me to compose it properly. But my sensibility will be very much hurt indeed, if, without consent I am to be staked as a rival, where I intended only to perform the part of a friend.

I beg of you to present my best respects to Sir Joshua Reynolds, and have the honour to be,

Dear Sir,

Your very faithful and obedient servant,

SAMUEL PARR.

HATTON,

December 11th [1791].

Directed to James Boswell, Esq.,
at Sir Joshua Reynolds's,
Leicester Square,
London.

Inscribed "Rev. Dr. Parr, December 11, 1791."

[Carefully written.]

But I understand that this great scholar and warm admirer of Johnson has yielded to repeated solicitations and executed the very difficult undertaking.

Seward wrote to Parr on 25th May 1791:

DEAR PARR,

You say nothing about Johnson's epitaph. Sir Joshua Reynolds desires me to iterate his request to you to write it. Boswell and myself add our solicitations. Why will you not do it? Compliments to Mrs. Parr.

Yours very truly,

W. SEWARD.

The letter given by Boswell in a note in the second edition of *The Life* (1793) is probably Parr's

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

answer, viz. : "The Reverend Dr. Parr, on being requested to undertake it, thus expressed himself in letter to William Seward, Esq." :

I leave this mighty task to some handier and some abler writer. The variety and splendour of Johnson's attainments, the peculiarities of his character, his private virtues and his literary publications, fill me with confusion and dismay, when I reflect upon the confined and difficult species of composition, in which alone they can be expressed, with propriety, upon his monument.

Parr would appear to have wavered, as is seen by a long letter to Reynolds. This letter begins :

DEAR SIR,

This is a strictly confidential letter, and I entreat you to communicate the contents of it to no man living except Mr. Windham ; in the soundness of whose judgment and the delicacy of whose honour I can implicitly and entirely confide. Seward enforcing his own request by the names of yourself and Mr. Boswell has urged me to write Johnson's epitaph.

* * * *

Terence, Cæsar, Livy, Tacitus, and even Cicero, whose writings are a common storehouse of modern Latinity, are according to my apprehensions, merely *plebs superûm* upon such an occasion.

He fully explains his extreme view of the proper Latin for the epitaph. He adds near the end of the letter :

If I should, in any moderate degree, satisfy myself I will send you what occurs to me ; and if otherwise I shall confess to you the plain truth. In the mean time I desire you to inform me of the very day upon which Johnson

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

was born and how old he was when he died. You will also be so good as to inform me, in a general way, by whom the money was subscribed for his monument; because all these circumstances may influence my mind when I write his epitaph, and I shall not even begin to write it till I know them.

On the 31st May 1791 Reynolds answered with a note at the end of his letter, "Dr. Johnson born 18th September 1709, died 13th December 1784," and sent a list of subscribers. Parr gives the dates of death and burial and age at death in the epitaph, but he does not give date or place of birth. Lichfield was not known to early Romans and could not therefore be mentioned.

Then follow two letters mostly filled with objurgations on the lapidary style. Poor Reynolds must have dreaded the post which brought him these portentous and irritating screeds, but the worst trouble came in his last letter to Parr, written only half a year before his death.

From Sir Joshua Reynolds.

LONDON,

July 11, 1791.

DEAR SIR,

You may depend on having all your injunctions relative to the inscription punctually obeyed. We have great time before us. The statue is hardly yet begun, so that the inscription will not be wanted for at least these twelve months: in the meantime you will probably have an opportunity of seeing the monument itself, and the place which it is to occupy in St. Paul's.

There would be, I think, a propriety in having on the scroll a Greek sentence, as it would imply at first sight

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

that it is the monument of a scholar. Dr. Johnson was Professor of Ancient Literature to the Royal Academy. I could wish that this title might be on the monument : it was on this pretext that I persuaded the Academicians to subscribe a hundred guineas. But I do not want to encroach on your department : you must ultimately determine its propriety.

But Parr would have none of this ! The Royal Academy was unknown in Ancient Rome and therefore could not possibly be mentioned in a Latin inscription written on classical lines, however important an incident in Johnson's life it might indicate. There was now an interval, which was broken on 25th March 1795 by Edmond Malone, who took up Sir Joshua Reynolds's burden as a correspondent of Dr. Parr. He wrote on that as follows :

DEAR SIR,

I have understood that you, some years ago, were so good as to promise our late most excellent friend, Sir Joshua Reynolds, an inscription for Dr. Johnson's monument. The monument being now nearly finished and ready to be put up, the gentlemen who have had the conduct of it have requested me to apply to you for the epitaph, if you should have written one for this very extraordinary man.

This was much too off-hand a manner in which to treat this important subject to please Parr, so Malone had to write another letter, which he did on 3rd April. He wrote :

I am sure it is unnecessary to tell you that it was not from any want of attention or respect that I did not immediately answer your letter. The truth is, I wished to consult some of the gentlemen to whom the management of

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

Dr. Johnson's monument has been assigned, and I had not an opportunity of doing so till yesterday. The epitaph which you have written will, I have no doubt, be everything that they could wish, but as they and the surviving executor (Sir Wm. Scott) cannot properly adopt any inscription without seeing and approving it, and as you might possibly not choose to submit it at all to their inspection, unless upon a certain *assurance* of its being adopted, I thought it right to state this circumstance to you before you transmitted the epitaph. The persons I allude to are Mr. Burke, Mr. Windham, Sir Joseph Banks, Mr. Metcalfe, and Mr. Boswell, who together with myself were nominated as curators of the monument, and who are all extremely indebted to you for your exertions on the present occasion.

This elicited another long letter from Parr to the effect that Malone's surmise was correct. He says with regard to the distinguished men mentioned as curators :

I have an equal confidence in their judgement and in their candour. To that judgement and that candour I should appeal without hesitation, if in sending the epitaph I were allowed to consider them as private friends or literary auxiliaries. But the character with which your letter invests them is of another sort, and therefore I must suspend my final answer till I have the pleasure of conversing with you next week.

Malone then enclosed a letter written to him by Sir William Scott, to Parr. Scott makes the matter quite plain, and suggests that Parr should choose any three of the curators to discuss the epitaph with him.

But if this or something like it cannot conquer the Doctor's scruples, I fear I must decline joining in an application on

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

behalf of a public inscription the contents of which have never been seen, and therefore cannot have been adopted by any one gentleman who is to make the application.

An arrangement was come to, but when the epitaph was discussed the Johnsonians were determined to have some alterations. Parr wished to ignore Johnson's poetry completely, but this was not to be.

Malone protested, but Parr made the matter worse by joining *poeta* with *probabilis*. The Johnsonians were mad and would not stand this insult, as they thought. Parr argued for the adjective, but it was no good, and he had to give in. He wrote to a friend :

In arms were . . . Malone, Steevens, Sir W. Scott, Windham and even Fox, all in arms. The epithet was cold. They do not understand it, and I am a scholar not a Belles-Lettres man ; an epitaph writer not a panegyrist ; a critic not a partisan. However, to show that I have many arrows in my quiver, this I have altered thus—and it is well done, boy.

“ Poetæ luminibus sententiarum
et ponderibus verborum admirabili.”

You see he was not a poet in the high class of imagination. Had I praised Johnson as you would praise Pindar, it would have delighted the Johnsonian school.

He was very anxious about Fox's opinion, and wrote him a long letter :

I cannot help being anxious about your tried judgment on the word *probabilis*, and therefore when you have time to write half a dozen lines, pray favour me with it. I have not quite made up my mind about recalling the

HIS MONUMENT AND EPITAPH

epitaph. But I am much disposed to recall it, and even if I should fix upon some other word, my preference will be to *probabilis*. What say you to this :—

“Poetæ sententiarum et verborum ponderibus admirabili.”

This, as we have seen, he afterwards altered. Peace was restored, but Parr still gave trouble. Malone wrote :

Mr. Bacon wishes not to be shorn of his academical honour and that posterity should know that he was entitled to annex R.A. to his name. You will be so good therefore, as to Latinize this for him and to say how to do it.

Parr would not allow of this, and Malone wrote to him a few days after :

I have called upon Mr. Bacon, and he very reluctantly has agreed to omit any notice of his being a Royal Academician. Parr was very doubtful even of styling Bacon “sculptor,” because he found in Cælius Rhodiginus that the art of Statuary is divided into five sorts—that which relates to marble and stones is called *κολαπτική* and that which belongs to metals is styled *γλυρική*.

Parr’s two classical friends Burney and Routh agreed with him. Charles Burney wrote : “I am still as I at first was, an advocate for *probabilis*, nor do I much fancy the *luminibus et ponderibus*.”

The president of Magdalen : “I write to tell you I do not like the epitaph half so well in it altered as in its original state.” It is rather odd to find Parr writing of Dr. Routh in 1795 as the “venerable President” when he was forty years of age, and we know he lived on to 1854.

JOHNSON CLUB PAPERS

I am afraid you may think that I have gone too fully into these squabbles, but they seem to me of great interest, although of course I am not competent to express an opinion on the composition itself. If I have erred I hope you will forgive me.

Printed in Great Britain by

UNWIN BROTHERS, LIMITED

WOKING AND LONDON

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

MAR 2 1951

MAY 9 - 1952

1953

MAY 12

Form L9-42m-8, '49 (B5573) 444

THE LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

PR Johnson club,
3532 London -
A4 Johnson club
ser.2 papers.



AA 000 380 121 4

MAR 2 1956

PR
3532
A4
ser.2

