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# BOSWELL'S LIFE OF JOHNSON

By James Boswell

Abridged and edited, with an introduction

by Charles Grosvenor Osgood

Professor of English at Princeton University

Preface

In making this abridgement of Boswell's Life of Johnson I have omitted most of Boswell's criticisms, comments, and notes, all of Johnson's opinions in legal cases, most of the letters, and parts of the conversation dealing with matters which were of greater importance in Boswell's day than now. I have kept in mind an old habit, common enough, I dare say, among its devotees, of opening the book of random, and reading wherever the eye falls upon a passage of especial interest. All such passages, I hope, have been retained, and enough of the whole book to illustrate all the phases of Johnson's mind and of his time which Boswell observed.

Loyal Johnsonians may look upon such a book with a measure of scorn. I could not have made it, had I not believed that it would be the means of drawing new readers to Boswell, and eventually of finding for them in the complete work what many have already found--days and years of growing enlightenment and happy companionship, and an innocent refuge from the cares and perturbations of life.

Princeton, June 28, 1917.

# INTRODUCTION

Phillips Brooks once told the boys at Exeter that in reading biography three men meet one another in close intimacy--the subject of the biography, the author, and the reader. Of the three the most interesting is, of course, the man about whom the book is written. The most privileged is the reader, who is thus allowed to live familiarly with an eminent man. Least regarded of the three is the author. It is his part to introduce the others, and to develop between them an acquaintance, perhaps a friendship, while he, though ever busy and solicitous, withdraws into the background.

Some think that Boswell, in his Life of Johnson, did not sufficiently realize his duty of self-effacement. He is too much in evidence, too bustling, too anxious that his own opinion, though comparatively unimportant, should get a hearing. In general, Boswell's faults are easily noticed, and have been too much talked about. He was morbid, restless, self-conscious, vain, insinuating; and, poor fellow, he died a drunkard. But the essential Boswell, the skilful and devoted artist, is almost unrecognized. As the creator of the Life of Johnson he is almost as much effaced as is Homer in the Odyssey. He is indeed so closely concealed that the reader suspects no art at all. Boswell's performance looks easy enough--merely the more or less coherent stringing together of a mass of memoranda. Nevertheless it was rare and difficult, as is the highest achievement in art. Boswell is primarily the artist, and he has created one of the great masterpieces of the world.* He created nothing else, though his head was continually filling itself with literary schemes that came to nought. But into his Life of Johnson he poured all his artistic energies, as Milton poured

his into Paradise Lost, and Vergil his into the Aneid.

* Here I include his Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides as essentially a part of the Life. The Journal of a Tour in Corsica is but a propaedeutic study.

First, Boswell had the industry and the devotion to his task of an artist. Twenty years and more he labored in collecting his material. He speaks frankly of his methods. He recorded the talk of Johnson and his associates partly by a rough shorthand of his own, partly by an exceptional memory, which he carefully trained for this very purpose. 'O for shorthand to take this down!' said he to Mrs. Thrale as they listened to Johnson; and she replied: 'You'll carry it all in your head; a long head is as good as shorthand.' Miss Hannah More recalls a gay meeting at the Garricks', in Johnson's absence, when Boswell was bold enough to match his skill with no other than Garrick himself in an imitation of Johnson. Though Garrick was more successful in his Johnsonian recitation of poetry, Boswell won in reproducing his familiar conversation. He lost no time in perfecting his notes both mental and stenographic, and sat up many a night followed by a day of headache, to write them in final form, that none of the freshness and glow might fade. The sheer labor of this process, not to mention the difficulty, can be measured only by one who attempts a similar feat. Let him try to report the best conversation of a lively evening, following its course, preserving its point, differentiating sharply the traits of the participants, keeping the style, idiom, and exact words of each. Let him reject all parts of it, however diverting, of which the charm and force will evaporate with the occasion, and retain only that which will be as amusing, significant, and lively as ever at the end of one hundred, or, for all that we can see, one thousand years. He will

then, in some measure, realize the difficulty of Boswell's performance. When his work appeared Boswell himself said: 'The stretch of mind and prompt assiduity by which so many conversations are preserved, I myself, at some distance of time, contemplate with wonder.'

He was indefatigable in hunting up and consulting all who had known parts or aspects of Johnson's life which to him were inaccessible. He mentions all told more than fifty names of men and women whom he consulted for information, to which number many others should be added of those who gave him nothing that he could use. 'I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly.' He agonized over his work with the true devotion of an artist: 'You cannot imagine,' he says, 'what labor, what perplexity, what vexation I have endured in arranging a prodigious multiplicity of materials, in supplying omissions, in searching for papers buried in different masses, and all this besides the exertion of composing and polishing.' He despairs of making his picture vivid or full enough, and of ever realizing his preconception of his masterpiece.

Boswell's devotion to his work appears in even more extraordinary ways. Throughout he repeatedly offers himself as a victim to illustrate his great friend's wit, ill-humor, wisdom, affection, or goodness. He never spares himself, except now and then to assume a somewhat diaphanous anonymity. Without regard for his own dignity, he exhibits himself as humiliated, or drunken, or hypochondriac, or inquisitive, or resorting to petty subterfuge--anything for the accomplishment of his one main purpose. 'Nay, Sir,' said Johnson, 'it was not the wine that made your head ache, but the sense that I put into it.' 'What, Sir,' asks the hapless Boswell, 'will sense make the

head ache?' 'Yes, Sir, when it is not used to it.'

Boswell is also the artist in his regard for truth. In him it was a passion. Again and again he insists upon his authenticity. He developed an infallible gusto and unerring relish of what was genuinely Johnsonian in speech, writing, or action; and his own account leads to the inference that he discarded, as worthless, masses of diverting material which would have tempted a less scrupulous writer beyond resistance. 'I observed to him,' said Boswell, 'that there were very few of his friends so accurate as that I could venture to put down in writing what they told me as his sayings.' The faithfulness of his portrait, even to the minutest details, is his unremitting care, and he subjects all contributed material to the sternest criticism.

Industry and love of truth alone will not make the artist. With only these Boswell might have been merely a tireless transcriber. But he had besides a keen sense of artistic values. This appears partly in the unity of his vast work. Though it was years in the making, though the details that demanded his attention were countless, yet they all centre consistently in one figure, and are so focused upon it, that one can hardly open the book at random to a line which has not its direct bearing upon the one subject of the work. Nor is the unity of the book that of an undeviating narrative in chronological order of one man's life; it grows rather out of a single dominating personality exhibited in all the vicissitudes of a manifold career. Boswell often speaks of his work as a painting, a portrait, and of single incidents as pictures or scenes in a drama. His eye is keen for contrasts, for picturesque moments, for dramatic action. While it is always the same Johnson whom he makes the central figure, he studies to shift the background, the interlocutors, the light and shade, in search of new revelations and

effects. He presents a succession of many scenes, exquisitely wrought, of Johnson amid widely various settings of Eighteenth-Century England. And subject and setting are so closely allied that each borrows charm and emphasis from the other. Let the devoted reader of Boswell ask himself what glamor would fade from the church of St. Clement Danes, from the Mitre, from Fleet Street, the Oxford coach, and Lichfield, if the burly figure were withdrawn from them; or what charm and illumination, of the man himself would have been lost apart from these settings. It is the unseen hand of the artist Boswell that has wrought them inseparably into this reciprocal effect.

The single scenes and pictures which Boswell has given us will all of them bear close scrutiny for their precision, their economy of means, their lifelikeness, their artistic effect. None was wrought more beautifully, nor more ardently, than that of Johnson's interview with the King. First we see the plain massive figure of the scholar amid the elegant comfort of Buckingham House. He is intent on his book before the fire. Then the approach of the King, lighted on his way by Mr. Barnard with candles caught from a table; their entrance by a private door, with Johnson's unconscious absorption, his sudden surprise, his starting up, his dignity, the King's ease with him, their conversation, in which the King courteously draws from Johnson knowledge of that in which Johnson is expert, Johnson's manly bearing and voice throughout--all is set forth with the unadorned vividness and permanent effect which seem artless enough, but which are characteristic of only the greatest art.

Boswell's Life of Johnson is further a masterpiece of art in that it exerts the vigorous energy of a masterpiece, an abundance of what,

for want of a better word, we call personality. It is Boswell's confessed endeavor to add this quality to the others, because he perceived that it was an essential quality of Johnson himself, and he more than once laments his inability to transmit the full force and vitality of his original. Besides artistic perception and skill it required in him admiration and enthusiasm to seize this characteristic and impart it to his work. His admiration he confesses unashamed: 'I said I worshipped him . . . I cannot help worshipping him, he is so much superior to other men.' He studied his subject intensely. 'During all the course of my long intimacy with him, my respectful attention never abated.' Upon such intensity and such ardor and enthusiasm depend the energy and animation of his portrait.

But it exhibits other personal qualities than these, which, if less often remarked, are at any rate unconsciously enjoyed. Boswell had great social charm. His friends are agreed upon his liveliness and good nature. Johnson called him 'clubbable,' 'the best traveling companion in the world,' 'one Scotchman who is cheerful,' 'a man whom everybody likes,' 'a man who I believe never left a house without leaving a wish for his return.' His vivacity, his love of fun, his passion for good company and friendship, his sympathy, his amiability, which made him acceptable everywhere, have mingled throughout with his own handiwork, and cause it to radiate a kind of genial warmth. This geniality it may be which has attracted so many readers to the book. They find themselves in good company, in a comfortable, pleasant place, agreeably stimulated with wit and fun, and cheered with friendliness. They are loth to leave it, and would ever enter it again. This rare charm the book owes in large measure to its creator.

The alliance of author with subject in Boswell's Johnson is one of the

happiest and most sympathetic the world has known. So close is it that one cannot easily discern what great qualities the work owes to each. While it surely derives more of its excellence than is commonly remarked from the art of Boswell, its greatness after all is ultimately that of its subject. The noble qualities of Johnson have been well discerned by Carlyle, and his obvious peculiarities and prejudices somewhat magnified and distorted in Macaulay's brilliant refractions. One quality only shall I dwell upon, though that may be the sum of all the rest. Johnson had a supreme capacity for human relationship. In him this capacity amounted to genius.

In all respects he was of great stature. His contemporaries called him a colossus, the literary Goliath, the Giant, the great Cham of literature, a tremendous companion. His frame was majestic; he strode when he walked, and his physical strength and courage were heroic. His mode of speaking was 'very impressive,' his utterance 'deliberate and strong.' His conversation was compared to 'an antique statue, where every vein and muscle is distinct and bold.' From boyhood throughout his life his companions naturally deferred to him, and he dominated them without effort. But what overcame the harshness of this autocracy, and made it reasonable, was the largeness of a nature that loved men and was ever hungry for knowledge of them. 'Sir,' said he, 'I look upon every day lost in which I do not make a new acquaintance.' And again: 'Why, Sir, I am a man of the world. I live in the world, and I take, in some degree, the color of the world as it moves along.' Thus he was a part of all that he met, a central figure in his time, with whose opinion one must reckon in considering any important matter of his day.

His love of London is but a part of his hunger for men. 'The happiness

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