

Dr. Johnson and his Times.

I.

DR. JOHNSON was a man—Carlyle would almost make us believe *the* man—of one particular century, the eighteenth. There was no inconvenient overlapping at either end in his case ; so it is easy to remember : he lived from 1709 to 1784, just seventy-five years—a large part of the Georgian era ; and was, at least in the world of letters, if we cannot travel quite all the way with Carlyle, undoubtedly King of his Company.

An eventful century ! But what century is not eventful ? Johnson did not live to see the most momentous of all the events of that century—its climax and catastrophe—the French Revolution, but he lived in the age which was the preparation for it, the age of Tom Paine, Rousseau, Voltaire—Rousseau and Voltaire, of whom he once said, in reply to the pertinacious Boswell, “ Why, sir, it is difficult to settle the proportion of iniquity between them.” In his own country, he lived to see the Jacobite conspiracy of 1715, and the more serious attempt of Charles Edward to regain the throne of his ancestors in 1745. He lived to see the gradual decay of the Jacobite cause, to which he himself made no secret of indulging some leanings, and the equally gradual triumph of the Hanoverian. He lived to see the conquest of Canada and of India—and the loss of America. His was the age of great scholars : Bentley, Porson, the Wartons ; of great writers : Burke, Gibbon, Goldsmith, Warburton ; of great painters, to name only Reynolds and Gainsborough ; and last, but not least, of great statesmen ; for was it not the age of Walpole, whom Johnson generously designated “ a fixed star,” Chatham, Fox, Burke—and of Pitt, though his star (“ meteor ” was Johnson’s term) was only just rising as Johnson’s was setting.

Johnson not only lived in these times, these stirring times ; he was, so to speak, part of them, a *large* part—they were *his* Times. He was not a Statesman, though he would have liked to be one ; but he wrote many important political pamphlets, and wielded considerable influence with politicians. He was certainly not a painter, but he was the intimate friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds. As a man of letters, whether scholar or writer, his place is unques-

tioned, though, according to some critics, his scholarship may not have been of the deepest, nor his style of the simplest: and as a wise man, a man of extraordinary conversational and argumentative skill, he stands without a rival—one might almost say, in any age. He, Samuel Johnson, “the English plebeian, and moving rag-and-dust mountain, coarse, proud, irascible, imperious,” as Carlyle, in his bland manner, depicts him, was all this—that is the marvel of it!

And now we must leave the Times alone, and stick closely to the Doctor.

Johnson's father was a bookseller at Lichfield, who also, on market days, used to open a shop in Birmingham, where, strangely enough, there was no regular bookshop in those days. Samuel, consequently, was, so to speak, cradled in books from his infancy; and, all his life, while, according to his own confession, not a steady, diligent, reader, was yet a voracious consumer of literature. “He knew more books than any man alive,” was Adam Smith's estimate of him; and, though he scarcely ever read a book through, if his own account may be credited, and always denied that anybody else did, he had a wonderful knack of getting at the heart of a book without the labour of entire perusal.

His school days, first at Lichfield, then at Stourbridge Grammar Schools, need no special comment. It is enough to record that Johnson always spoke appreciatively of his schoolmasters, though both were of the old flogging type; and once said to Boswell that Dr. Adams, afterwards Master of Pembroke, had told him that when he went up to Oxford he was the best qualified for the University that he (Dr. Adams) had ever known come there.

Johnson felt his poverty acutely at Oxford: and indeed, it seems to have been extreme. At one time he was unable to attend lectures because his toes were coming through his shoes. Some unknown friend placed a new pair outside his door, which Johnson promptly threw away! His pride was equal to his poverty. It might occur to us that at least Johnson could have had his shoes mended. But he had views on this point; for when Boswell once drew attention to a hole in his stocking and mildly suggested a darn, Johnson replied: “No, sir, a hole might be an accident, but a darn is premeditated poverty.” The remittances from Lichfield, always a matter of difficulty, gradually ceased, for his father became

insolvent : and Johnson had to leave Oxford—without a degree !

It was about this time, when Johnson was in his twentieth year, that the nervous malady, melancholy, or hypochondria, from which he suffered at intervals all his life, began to afflict him horribly, and at times almost to overwhelm him. He was frequently in terror of insanity, and quite incapacitated for mental effort. So then, if there were often periods of inertness—bitterly regretted, often examples of fretful outburst, of unmannerly retort (“ Sir, I perceive you are a vile Whig ” : “ Sir, you are impertinent,” and that kind of thing)—shall we not be willing to put them down to the baleful effects of disease rather than to vicious intention ?

When Johnson returned to Lichfield after leaving Oxford, it is difficult to understand how he managed to live at all, so straitened were his means. His father died soon after his return ; and it appears that £20 was all that he ever received from the estate—such as it was. But, here again, his unaccountable amiability seems to have served him in good stead ; for kind friends both at Lichfield and Birmingham rallied round this uncouth, melancholy, but always companionable scholar—notably a Mr. Gilbert Walmsley and a Mr. Hector, at whose houses he was always a welcome guest.

It was at Birmingham that he first began to earn a little—very little—by his pen : and here that he first became acquainted with Mrs. Porter—his future wife. This marriage excited the mirth of some of his friends, and still provokes a smile—Johnson twenty-seven, the widow Porter forty-eight. Yet it *was* a happy match on the whole. A bond of mutual esteem, real affection, and on Johnson's part—actual admiration, overcame all disruptive tendencies, and held this uncomely pair in close union. Johnson once told his gay young friend, Topham Beauclerk (a member of the celebrated “ Literary Club ”), that his marriage was “ a love marriage on both sides ”—a confidence which, of course, found its way to the ears of Boswell.

When Johnson, shortly after his marriage, kept a school at Edial, near Lichfield, his pupils—David Garrick and his brother George among them—used to make merry over their master's demonstrative attentions to his “ Tetty ” (as he called his mature spouse).

The school did not keep *him* ; and in March, 1737, the year of Queen Caroline's death, Johnson and his pupil, David Garrick,

set out for London to seek their fortunes—a memorable event for them, and for London. Both Johnson and Garrick were as poor as mice: and Johnson once in after life, at a large dinner-party, referring to some date that was being discussed, blurted out: “That was the year when I came to London with twopence halfpenny in my pocket.” Garrick, who was also present, and who did not relish such candour, interrupted with: “Eh, what do you say?” Whereupon Johnson replied: “Why, yes, when I came with twopence halfpenny in *my* pocket, and thou, Davy, with three halfpence in thine!”

And now that we have got our hero, at the age of twenty-eight, safely launched into London, I will cease to adhere to exact chronological order, and will regard phases of Johnson’s life rather than periods. These phases naturally resolve themselves into three: the personal and domestic; the social and club life; and the literary. Of what is usually regarded as public life, political, municipal, legal, oratorical life, he had little or none: and yet he was, and is famous! This is the riddle that requires solution.

It is as a Londoner that Johnson is best known. London became his home, and remained his home till the day of his death. “When a man is tired of London, sir, he is tired of life,” he used to say. His first lodgings were in Exeter Street, Strand; and he dined for eightpence at the “Pine Apple,” in New Street hard by. And now began in grim earnest the hunt for a livelihood, a hunt precarious, and sometimes unsuccessful, which, indeed, lasted till, at the age of fifty-three, he was rewarded by George III with an “old age pension” of £300. He was a little nervous about accepting this pension, seeing that he had been but a lukewarm adherent of the House of Hanover. Lord Bute’s magnanimity, however, disarmed him. “It is not given you for anything you are to do, but for what you have done,” he told Johnson: and Johnson was satisfied. It would appear that a pension granted is not always quite the same thing as a pension paid: for Johnson had to dun Lord Bute for his, as is evident from a letter of Johnson’s found among Lord Bute’s papers. It was only an oversight, of course: the “pigeon-hole” is evidently not a modern invention.

Mrs. Johnson was at first left behind at Lichfield, but soon rejoined her husband; and they lived at various places in or near London. Mrs. Johnson did not fancy London air, and sometimes

had to be provided with lodgings in the suburbs, if we may so stigmatize such spots as Hampstead, which, as far as accessibility is concerned, was then further from London than Epsom is now.

It was at these times that Johnson, when belated in London, used to tramp the streets all night with his wild, gloomy friend Savage; for he could not afford himself rooms in Town as well as the Hampstead lodgings—at least this is Boswell's justification of his hero's escapades. Savage, who has been immortalized in "The Lives of the Poets," was a strange sort of friend for Johnson, and certainly not a desirable one: but a cruel mystery hung round his birth, misfortune dogged his life, and tragedy concluded it. He was an unfortunate; and that was enough for Johnson. As Goldsmith once said of another of Johnson's friends: "He is now become miserable, and that insures the protection of Johnson." Goldsmith had reason for saying so; for Johnson had been a good friend to him. The incident of the sale of the "Vicar of Wakefield" always bears repetition. "I received," said Johnson, "a message from poor Goldsmith that he was in great distress. I sent him a guinea, and promised to come to him directly. I accordingly went as soon as I was dressed, and found that his landlady had arrested him for his rent, at which he was in a violent passion. I perceived he had already changed my guinea, and had got a bottle of Madeira before him. I put the cork into the bottle, and desired he would be calm" (the cork was, no doubt, a prudent but perhaps not a very soothing preliminary). "He then produced a novel that he had ready for the press. I looked into it, and saw its merits; went to a bookseller, and sold it for £60. I brought Goldsmith the money, and he discharged his rent, not without rating his landlady for having used him so ill."

Johnson, after his wife's death in 1752, when he was forty-three years old, made his house in Bolt Court and elsewhere an asylum, or, as Carlyle calls it, a Lazaretto, for invalid undesirables. "No one *loved* the poor like Dr. Johnson," said Mrs. Thrale, who had ample opportunity of knowing.

While Johnson loved all his species, he had, naturally, his particular friendships; and, among these, two names must always, I think, stand out most conspicuously—Boswell and Thrale. There were, of course, others of both sexes—Reynolds, Garrick, Langton, the Burneys, Burke, and many more; but Boswell, who worshipped

and I believe loved Johnson, and whom Johnson loved, but certainly did not worship; the Thrles, who provided a little "prophet's chamber" for the Seer, both in London and at Streatham, who hung on his conversation, bore with his manners and rebuffs, and intensely appreciated him—these are the two names that bulk the largest in any sketch of Johnson's private life.

Of Boswell, and his unique book, much has been written, and there is always much more to say. That Boswell's affection for Johnson was genuine and disinterested, no one but a cynic can doubt; and that Johnson, after a time, reciprocated this feeling in equally clear, notwithstanding an occasional rebuff. "You have only two subjects, sir; yourself and me—and I am sick of both."

Their first meeting—that momentous meeting as Boswell felt it to be—was at the bookshop of a Mr. Thomas Davies in Russell Street, Covent Garden—the same Davies whom Johnson afterwards described as a "successful author generated by the corruption of a bookseller." Boswell got one or two rattling snubs to start with, which he partly deserved. Johnson had been telling Davies that Garrick had refused him an order for the play for Miss Williams. Boswell, rushing on his fate, foolishly struck in with: "Oh, sir, I cannot think Mr. Garrick would grudge such a trifle to you." "Sir," said Johnson sternly, "I have known David Garrick longer than you have done; and I know no right you have to talk to me on the subject." Such was the not very auspicious beginning of a friendship which lasted till death, and stood many tests: the test of long separation, when "Bozzy" went on his travels; the test of companionship in travel, when they took that rough three months' tour in the Hebrides together; the test of many snubs and some doubtful compliments—as when Johnson said, "Sir, your pronunciation is not offensive," or began making other "nasty" remarks about Scotland, as was his wont. Mrs. Boswell never shared in her husband's idolatry. She could not get over Johnson's uncouth ways—such as turning candles upside down over her carpets, to make the candles burn better. He was not slow to perceive her disaffection, to which he would make sly allusions in his letters to Boswell. "She was so glad to see me go," he wrote once, "that I have almost a mind to come again, that she may again have the same pleasure."

There is no passage in Boswell more charming than the account he gives of two days he and Johnson spent together on their way to Harwich, whence Boswell was to set sail for the Continent. It was on this occasion that they talked about Bishop Berkeley's theory of the non-existence of matter; and Boswell hazarded the opinion that it was difficult to refute. "I refute it thus," replied Johnson, striking with his foot a large stone, till he rebounded from it. Their parting was quite pathetic—the sage of fifty-four, the young friend of twenty-three, embraced. Boswell said: "I hope, sir, you will not forget me in my absence." "Nay, sir, it is more likely you should forget me than that I should forget you." Johnson heartily disliked the sea, or would probably have accompanied his pupil. The day before, while wandering about Harwich, they entered the church; and Johnson took the opportunity of saying: "Now that you are going to leave your native country, recommend yourself to the protection of your Creator and Redeemer"—which Boswell at once did, on his knees.

And here may well be introduced what, indeed, it would be impossible to omit, if we are to form any just conception of Samuel Johnson's character—I mean his constant and sincere piety. No one ever doubted it in his lifetime; and probably—I think we may say certainly—it lay at the bottom of the respect and love with which he was regarded. People knew him to be learned and wise beyond other men: but they also believed him to be deeply religious—a man who feared God and followed after righteousness. I was about to add—in a sceptical and licentious age; for the eighteenth century is certainly often credited with the decay of religion and the growth of scepticism, corruption in politics, and profligacy in manners. But generalizations are frequently dangerous; and almost every age in turn comes under the lash of the censor. We must not forget that, while it was the age of Voltaire, Hume, Paine, and Wilkes, it was also the age of Butler, Paley, the Wesleys, Burke—and Johnson. Johnson's religion was not something apart from his life, not merely a matter of formal prayer, and Sunday attendance at St. Clement Danes; it was the very essence of his character, and the rule of his conduct. His wretched melancholy often aggravated his poverty, or marred his prosperity, rendered his own company formidable, and death a constant horror; but his ardent piety enabled him to surmount, or at least to support, every event with

fortitude and resignation. Johnson's failings—you might use a stronger term—were many. He never tried to disguise them, and always repented of them bitterly. Whatever may have been Johnson's sins of omission or commission, there is abundant and convincing evidence that he lived and died, in the truest sense, a Christian.

With the Thrales, as I have already hinted, Johnson, at the age of fifty-six, found a second home. They made much of him; and he fully appreciated their kindness, and the unfamiliar comforts with which they surrounded him. After Thrale's death Johnson soon discovered that his society was not quite so indispensable at Streatham as he had fondly imagined: and when Mrs. Thrale married the fiddler (as Johnson contemptuously called him), the cooling friendship—at least on the lady's part—naturally grew colder.

To lose the amenities of Streatham was a severe deprivation for Johnson at his advanced age, for he was now seventy-three. But he had not forgotten to practise his own doctrine of "keeping friendship in constant repair"; so that many pleasant houses were still open to him, and, indeed, not long before his death, he appears to have gone on a round of visits: to Lichfield; Ashbourne, to his friends the Taylors, where also he was pressed by the Duke of Devonshire to stay at Chatsworth, but "told them that a sick man is not a fit inmate of a great house"; Birmingham, where he was entertained by his old schoolfellow, Mr. Hector; and Oxford, where he stayed a few days with Dr. Adams, Master of Pembroke College—the same Dr. Adams who was one of the Junior Fellows of the College when Johnson first went up to Oxford. This was his last visit. Feeling the dropsy and asthma gaining upon him, he returned to Bolt Court on November 16, 1784, and on December 13 he was dead.

(To be concluded.)

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