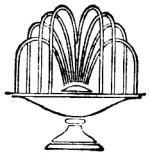
FOUR PORTRAITS

Studies of the
Eighteenth Century

by

PETER QUENNELL



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14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

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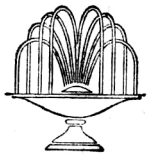

Collins
14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

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To
ANN O'NEILL

THIS BOOK IS SET IN FONTANA, A NEW TYPE FACE DESIGNED
FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF THE HOUSE OF COLLINS, AND
PRINTED BY THEM IN GREAT BRITAIN

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Foreword

AMONG books consulted during the preparation of these portraits, I owe a special debt to the *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle*, edited by the late Geoffrey Scott and Professor Pottle of Yale, and privately printed in New York more than a decade ago: the *Letters of James Boswell*, edited by C. B. Tinker: G. M. Young's excellent short life of Gibbon: Gibbon's *Journal*, edited by D. M. Low and his *Private Letters*, edited by R. E. Prothero: W. L. Cross's admirable biography of Laurence Sterne: and two recent studies of Wilkes, *That Devil Wilkes* by Raymond Postgate and *A Life of John Wilkes* by O. A. Sherrard. I wish to express my gratitude to Mr. Cyril Connolly, for permission to reprint certain passages that have appeared under his editorship in the pages of *Horizon*: to Mr. Leslie Hore-Belisha, who has allowed me to photograph a bust of Laurence Sterne in his collection: and to Sir Edward Marsh, who, with his customary benevolence, has helped me correct the proofs.

P. Q.

JAMES BOSWELL

IN 1763 the war of colonial aggrandisement, waged between France and England since 1756, jolted to an abrupt and (many Englishmen considered) a somewhat ignominious close. England had conquered widely and plundered largely. After the series of humiliating reverses that in every century have been needed to rouse our war-spirit, Pitt with superb self-confidence had assumed direction of affairs; and under his control British fleets and armies had taken Quebec, seized Pondicherry, and laid hold of some of France's most lucrative West Indian possessions. It was Pitt who had won the war, but now the old King, second of the Hanoverian line, was dead; and, to open the reign of his grandson George III, an inexperienced but high-minded and obstinate young man who had been reared in strict seclusion by an ambitious German mother, a new minister, Lord Bute, determined to patch up the peace. He accomplished his end by sacrificing—quite unnecessarily, it was believed—a number of important acquisitions. Great Britain would lose her grasp of the Goree slave trade and forgo the sugar, rum and spices of Guadaloupe and Martinique. The City of London, with consequences which must afterwards be described, was moved to indignation; and the City represented a centre of middle-class opposition, resentful of the Court and mistrustful of its ministers, around which many different forces were ready to coalesce. The Peace of Paris was declared to be both unjustifiable and incomprehensible—it resembled the peace of God, said John Wilkes, since it passed all understanding. But, if the peace was unpopular in the City, for a time at least it was welcomed throughout the country. Wars of that age did not fall with a particularly heavy impact upon the civilian population; patriotic animosities were not yet widespread; the learned and fashionable in France and England con-

tinued to correspond. But a European conflict meant expense at home, press-gangs for the very poor, tedious service with the militia for the wealthier classes; and, though the ban on travel was not absolute, it imposed restrictions extremely irksome to liberal and inquiring natures.

1763, then, was a year of planning and renewed activity. It was one of those moments, not uncommon in the history of a period, when several gifted human beings happen at the same time to reach a decisive stage, from which their subsequent courses wind away in various directions. A young Englishman left the militia, determined to travel abroad; a young Scotsman had reached London, resolved that he would make his name; a consumptive Yorkshire parson, having won the first rounds in a battle against death, was halfway through the composition of a fantastic masterpiece which was to introduce a new fashion in style and sentiment; a rakish country gentleman, seizing the opportunity presented by the incompetence of the government and the autocratic intransigeance of their royal master, declared war upon the Court party and thus, almost in spite of himself—for he was neither completely disinterested nor conspicuously upright—fought in the cause of the subject's liberties a fierce and victorious battle. Gibbon, Boswell, Sterne, Wilkes, are names that evoke, if not the whole of the eighteenth-century achievement, some important aspects of its fertile and abounding genius. Unlike in many respects, they were alike in their vitality and their versatility, their devotion both to the pleasures of the world and to the satisfactions of the intellect. They lived with gusto: they died regretfully. We place them at once in the architectural setting that belonged to them by right—against sober classical housefronts or behind the large windows of spaciously proportioned rooms, among equipment as sensible in its grace as it is solid in its structure.

Theirs was an age conscious of its own enlightenment. Already the beginning of the century seemed barbarous and far away. Not only had the period developed a social

conscience—tentative attacks were being made upon a dozen public abuses, the filth of the prisons, the plight of debtors, the condition of the poor; but its manners had been purified and its taste refined. During the 'thirties, a diarist had observed that the farm-carts which came up to London frequently travelled home again bearing a cargo of play-books and romances; and since that time the appetite of English readers had grown more and more exacting. Yes, the period, not inaccurately, might be described as an Augustan age; but with the urbanity of its civilization went an appalling physical harshness. The hand holding a calf-bound volume had been twisted and knobbed by gout: the face under the candle-light was scarred by small-pox. Child after child died before it had left its cradle: women struggled resignedly from one child-birth to the next: the young and hopeful dropped off overnight, a prey to mysterious disorders that the contemporary physician could neither diagnose nor remedy. But these tragedies brought their compensation. Since the accidents of birth and the maladies of childhood then accounted for a large proportion of human offspring,[1] few men and women reached maturity who did not possess deep reserves of physical and nervous strength. In the debility of such a man as Horace Walpole there was, he himself admitted, something Herculean; and it is, no doubt, this element of intense vitality hidden beneath the surface, which gives to so many eighteenth-century portraits their vigorous and personal quality. Seldom have human characters been so boldly and frankly displayed; and of the group of English-men whose activities we are observing in the year 1763, each possessed a facial mask modelled on his temperament, shaped by his ruling passion and by the varying experiences through which that passion led him. Across the gulf of almost two hundred years, they continue to command our scrutiny—Sterne's cadaverous simper, Wilkes's crooked grin, half-friendly and half-fiendish, Gibbon's plump im-

[1] "The death of a new-born child before that of its parents may seem an unnatural but it is strictly a probable event; since of any given number the greater part are extinguished before their ninth year. . . ."—Gibbon: *Autobiography*.

passivity, the sharp nose, pawky smile and restlessly good-humoured features of a self-despising yet self-delighted Boswell.

Of the four, it is Gibbon's face that seems to reveal the least, and Boswell's that strikes an observer as the most defenceless. On numerous occasions they met, but seldom with friendly feelings; Gibbon had something about him of the foreign *petit maître*, deliberate in utterance and large in gesture, while Boswell's affectations were so transparent, his vanity was so open and so unguarded, yet the effect of his irrepressible good humour always so disarming, that his friends laughed at him and liked him on one and the same impulse, and learned to like him all the more because they respected him so little. Each was a man bound to an exacting destiny; but whereas Gibbon's destiny moved to a plan —the moment of exaltation among the ruins of the Capitol, when the great master-design suddenly flashed in upon him, came as the reward and consummation of many laborious years—it was the nature of Boswell's genius to work through accident. He was to follow a variety of false trails; even the authentic clue, when he had taken it up, again and again seemed to slip between his fingers; and there were interminable desperate wanderings before he achieved his end. In 1763 his progress was just beginning; as he sat in the back parlour of a London bookseller's shop drinking tea with the proprietor, Tom Davies, and his wife, through the glass door he saw advance a majestic ungainly figure, a huge elderly man in dark ill-fitting clothes, with wrinkled black worsted stockings and a scrubby unpowdered wig. Among the other purposes that Boswell had brought from Scotland was a determination to acquire the friendship of Samuel Johnson (towards whose "inflated Rotundity and tumified Latinity of Diction" he still adopted, nevertheless, a somewhat critical standpoint), and he had begged Davies to present him as soon as the chance occurred. Now Johnson's vast awkward body rolled into the outer shop; and, as Davies announced his arrival with mock-heroic

emphasis, Boswell breathlessly prepared himself for the perils of a first encounter.

Almost at once he was felled to the ground by a particularly ferocious snub. But to understand both the temerity that had urged Boswell to take any risk rather than remain ignobly silent, and the elasticity that enabled him, though at the time, as he admits himself, he had been "much mortified," to recover from the blow, it is essential to look back again along the road to Edinburgh and, beyond Edinburgh, to the modest magnificence of the House of Auchinleck. Here, in a mansion "of hewn stone, very stately and durable," which had been built by his father, the successful and famous advocate, not far from the ruins of the ancient castle, James Boswell entered the world in 1740. All his life he was to find in his lineage a source of romantic pleasure; for not only could he claim through his mother, born Euphemia Erskine, a latter-day yet highly gratifying connection with the Earls of Mar and Dundonald, but he had also a remote link with the progeny of Robert Bruce, and was directly descended from a certain Thomas Boswell, the first of that name to enjoy the Auchinleck estates, who had fallen with the monarch from whom he had received them on the field of Flodden. Of his origins Boswell often discoursed, and always with complacency. It was something to be the elder son of an old and distinguished line, to have been brought up in the poetic Ayrshire landscape, on the banks of the river Lugar which flowed across the park through a deep and rocky cleft, within sight of the broken battlements of a mediæval stronghold. To these prospects, while he was still a boy, he "appropriated some of the finest passages" of Greek and Latin verse, as he rambled book in hand among crags and pine trees. But, overshadowing Auchinleck, loomed the personality of his father: Lord Auchinleck was the foe of every romantic impulse.

In the parentage of exceptionally gifted men there can be distinguished very often a clash of temperaments: it is as if in the child of an oddly assorted union were embodied some restless longing or unsatisfied aspiration. And Mrs.

Boswell, or Lady Auchinleck as her son preferred she should be styled,[1] to judge by the deep affection with which he always regarded her, and his wild grief, years later, when he learned that she had died, was presumably a more affectionate and attractive character than the self-opinionated, grimly sententious law-lord. In her, perhaps, had lain dormant the seeds of the melancholy, poetry and irresponsibility that were to colour Boswell's life. Certainly, Lord Auchinleck's share in the composition of his eldest son is not easy to determine; nor, so long as he survived, did he cease to observe his offspring with a mixture of mild contempt and puzzled exasperation. Himself, he was as grave and steady as James was volatile. For him Scotland provided sufficient scope: when he spoke it was with a rough-edged Lowland accent: he was secure in his possessions and proud of the position he occupied: while James continually hankered after new excitements and dreamed of distant horizons and alien cities, forming all the time fresh projects to baffle and annoy his elders. Not that he was undutiful or emotionally unresponsive; he respected and feared his father, would have liked to love him, and fell in readily enough with the various educational schemes, designed to produce a second successful lawyer, that Lord Auchinleck at one moment or another propounded for his benefit. Thus, after preliminary schooling at Mr. Mundell's academy, James Boswell was entered at the University of Edinburgh, where he began the study of law, and then at Glasgow University, where he studied moral philosophy and rhetoric under Dr. Adam Smith. Undoubtedly he thirsted for knowledge, but in an erratic and irregular fashion. Lord Auchinleck was a scholar, his son a dabbler, with a mind that hovered as delightedly over serious and trifling subjects. Passionate, impetuous, moody and sentimental, he aspired by turn to every virtue, and was most vehement in his cultivation of those very moral qualities he was least capable of achieving.

[1] Lord Auchinleck's title, assumed on his elevation to the Bench, was not hereditary. It conferred no rights on his wife or his descendants.