

SAMUEL JOHNSON



JOHN WAIN

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Ken's
1941-1974
in Staffordshire

*Few can attain this man's knowledge, and few practise his virtues;
but all may suffer his calamity.*

Rasselas

*– He taught Laughing and Grief, they used to say.
– So he did, so he did.*

Alice in Wonderland

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Introduction

Samuel Johnson has not, I think, even yet come into his rightful reputation. Outside the English-speaking world he is virtually unknown, and within that world – or, at any rate, within England – certain stereotyped misconceptions about him still persist, not merely among the uneducated but among people who ought to know better and would enjoy knowing better.

This book, like all my work of the critical and expository kind, is addressed to the intelligent general reader. The specialist in Johnson studies has, in the last thirty years, been adequately catered for, even if I were capable of catering for him still further. Modern Johnsonian scholarship has advanced far into the work of editing and commentary. At last we are beginning to sort out what Johnson wrote and what he did not – always a difficulty in the case of a writer who wrote many fugitive and unsigned pieces and was also generous in giving his work away to others. And at last we are beginning to appreciate the complexities and niceties of Johnson's thinking about literature, about history, and about social and political issues.

I say 'we' because, after all, the work of the scholars is there for all of us to read. But in the nature of things the work of scholars is read primarily by other scholars. They talk to each other, and 'fit audience find though few'. Of course many of them are also teachers, and through their lectures and conversations a more accurate and enlightened attitude to Johnson might have spread to young people and thus slowly irradiated a generation. Might have. But it has manifestly not been happening. Young people for the most part still think of Johnson, when they think of him at all, as a stupid old reactionary. And not only young people. A highly intelligent and responsible journalist, whose life is spent in Fleet Street but very definitely on its respectable side, expressed surprise that I should be interested in Johnson. He hadn't thought of me as a reactionary kind of person: but Johnson, well, 'the arch-conservative . . .'.

Since he was speaking and not writing, I had no idea whether my friend intended the word 'conservative' to carry a large or a small c. But he evidently thought of Johnson, as so many people think of him, as an eighteenth-century ancestor of the typical modern Conservative. That is (to put the matter at its simplest) someone who in the eternal tug of war between labour and capital tends to find that his sympathies are with capital; who wants social change to be either gradual and cautious, or not to happen at all; who favours existing institutions rather than radical new solutions. This cap fits Johnson to some extent, but it obscures many of the finer and more humane points of his

thinking: his opposition to colonialism and to every form of exploitation; his hatred of the slave trade; his pleas for a more merciful penal system; his insistence that the real test of any civilization lies in its treatment of the poor.

So there is still a job to be done, at the level of humble usefulness, in presenting a picture of Johnson as he actually was instead of as he is thought of. The average reader's picture of Johnson is still very much the one he gets from Boswell, or from one of the countless popularizers of Boswell. And Boswell was a sentimental-romantic Tory of a very different stripe. Being a Scot, he yearned over the Stuarts, though he showed no impulse to translate his yearning into direct politics; being the son of a laird and a bit of a snob, he deferred to titled people, where Johnson, for all his support of 'subordination', was just as likely to growl at them; being something of a Pasha where women were concerned, he thought it overstepping the limit when a lady suggested to him that perhaps the sexes would be equal in the next world ('Nay, Madam, this is to ask too much'); being untroubled by any notion of the basic rights of the human being, he thought the slave trade an excellent institution. Boswell naturally highlights those moods and opinions of Johnson's that match his own. What we lose in his portrait is the deeply humanitarian Johnson, the man who from first to last rooted his life among the poor and outcast.

Apart from that general wish to spread a just notion of Johnson among a less specialized circle of readers, I have, I suppose, one other motive for writing about him. Perhaps more than most, I am in a position to see his life from the inside. I was born in the same district as Johnson – some thirty miles away – and in much the same social *milieu*. I went to the same university, and since then have lived the same life of Grub Street, chance employment, and the unremitting struggle to write enduring books against the background of an unstable existence. The literary and social situation that Johnson knew in its early days, I know in its twilight; and perhaps even this will give my book, whatever its shortcomings, some documentary interest.

J. W.

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