

THE  
NEW RAMBLER

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THE NEW RAMBLER

JOURNAL OF THE JOHNSON SOCIETY OF LONDON

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## LAWRENCE FITZROY POWELL

The Life of Samuel Johnson, written by James Boswell, has had distinguished editors: it may be affirmed with safety that the greatest of these is Dr. Powell. On August 9th. 1965, when he attained his eighty-fourth birthday, he was entertained to dinner in Oxford; the Hostess being Miss Mary Lascelles of Somerville College, who was supported by a distinguished literary company, of whom Dr. Middendorf and his wife represented the academic life of the United States. During the dinner a specially bound volume "Essays presented to Lawrence Fitzroy Powell",<sup>1</sup> was handed to him. This well merited honour will also be appreciated by numerous readers all over the world.

The book is full of good things; the greatest of them is the photograph of Dr. Powell at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Hyde in New Jersey; he has the appearance of a man benevolent to individuals and one who has accomplished a great feat of literature. We are interested to note that of twenty-one contributors to this volume, ten have read papers to this Society, on collateral branches of their studies. It is not possible to note in detail all the contributions but we may make brief notes of some of them. Professor Pottle and two others describe the life of James Boswell as an undergraduate, which shows how careful he was as a student in the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Utrecht and at the Advocates Library in Edinburgh, during a period of eight years. Notes from contemporary students are used to describe the courses which Boswell himself attended. Writing to his friend Temple, Boswell gives this account of his study for one day, "From 9 - 10 I attend the law class, from 10 - 11 the Astronomy, from 11 - 1 study at home, and from 1 - 2 attend a college upon Roman Antiquities. The afternoon and evening I likewise spend in study. I never walk except on Saturdays". Dr. James Clifford who is working on the second volume of his life of Dr. Johnson, gives an account of some of the problems which relate to the middle years of Johnson's life. Dr. Middendorf describes Johnson's interest in machinery and in commercial problems. Mr. Ketton Cremer writes on the country aspect of Johnson's life; Johnson's advice to Boswell that forestry is a highly intricate

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1. Johnson, Boswell and their Circle. Essays presented to Lawrence Fitzroy Powell. 1965. Oxford, at the Clarendon Press pp.338. price 48/-

science and his warning that he must plant trees in large numbers and in close formation, shows that he had studied the subject. Mr. Ian Jack gives a most interesting comparison of two great biographies, that by Boswell and the other by Lockhart in his "Life of Sir Walter Scott". Mr. Roger Lonsdale describes the early life of Dr. Burney in Kings Lynn, of his admiration for Samuel Johnson and of his efforts to further the circulation of the Dictionary in Norfolk.

Dr. Osborn writes an interesting description of the influence of Edmond Malone on Boswell. They were nearly of an age and both trained in the law; so that when they first met in London they at once became friends. Malone wrote, "Dr. Johnson is as correct and elegant in his common conversation as in his writings. He never has to study for either for thoughts or words; and is on all occasions so fluent, so accurate, and even eloquent, that I never left his company without regret. Sir Joshua told me that from the first outset in life, he always had this character; and by what means he attained it. He told him that he had early laid it down, as a fixed rule, always to do his best, on every occasion and in every company, to impart whatever he knew in the best language he could put it in; never suffering any careless expression to escape him, or attempting to deliver his thoughts without arranging them in the clearest manner he could, it has now become habitual to him". Mrs. Mary Hyde contributes a series of interesting letters and explanatory notes from Samuel Johnson to various correspondents.

The volume of Essays represents the accidentals of Johnson's mind and thought, as they have appeared to the contributors to this volume, all of whom have studied the subject deeply; Dr. Powell's great edition gives the detailed notices and the foundations upon which the accidentals are built. It is not too much to say that the Hill-Powell editions of Boswell's great life have a world wide circulation. In the Introduction Dr. Powell tells us that for twelve years he attended "this edition without deviation or remission". The wealth and accuracy of his notes; the rich appendices which add so much to the picture of the eighteenth century put all readers under a great debt to him; he may rest content in the knowledge that his work is well done.



## COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS<sup>1</sup>

by  
The Rev. F. N. Doubleday, M.R.C.S.

We stand here today to honour a man of obscure origin but of great renown. Professor James Clifford in his book "Young Samuel Johnson" has portrayed him as he was in his earlier years. It is as a man of national and international fame that we honour him today.

His rise is that of the individual; those who he met in daily intercourse were people of varying age, sex, and occupation, yet all of them alike felt that they had met a man of real personality. The secret of the impression which he made lies in one word - character. How vital to a nation is character; that unflinching determination to do what is right, both by the individual and through his or her impact upon the nation of which we are a part. In his Dictionary Johnson defines Character as a mark, a stamp, or as personal qualities; particularly constitution of the mind. Let us consider these characteristics.

A mark, a stamp. Did ever man stamp his personality on the company in which he found himself to a greater degree than Samuel Johnson. Whether it was in his home among the curious company of individuals with whom he lived; or in the intellectual society of the Club; or in the affluent company of the Thrales or Sir Joshua Reynolds and his sister; Johnson was dominant. Johnson quoted from Addison that character may mean an account of anything as being good or bad. What cause we have, as a nation, to consider the strong bad characters, who wreak such harm in our midst. Johnson was not a bad character in this sense, his faults were venial. Yet would you have wished to sit near him at a meal; or to have been present when he descended like a great bomb upon those of whom he did not approve. What a healthy thing it is if we, each one of us, realise that we too have our weaknesses and our faults, the disadvantages of them may be overcome, drowned, by the development and appreciation of the value of character; which must come to us as we study the life and writings of Dr. Johnson.

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<sup>1</sup>Address delivered at the Commemoration Service in Westminster Abbey, Saturday, December 18th. 1965.

The development of that which is best in character is to be obtained by the practice of religion. That was the determining factor throughout the life of Samuel Johnson. As a boy his mother taught him to read the Holy Scriptures and to learn by heart the Collects from the Book of Common Prayer. Like so many people, in his adolescence he passed through a period of doubt, which continued to trouble him throughout his life, he was not a regular church attendant. Yet always the sense and reality of religion and of religious worship were with him.

In an essay on "A Review of a Free Enquiry" he writes "such wisdom arising from the comparison of a part with the whole of our existence, those that want it most cannot possibly obtain from philosophy, nor unless the method of education, and the general tenor of life are changed, will very easily receive it from religion. The bulk of mankind is not very likely to be very wise or very good; and I know not whether there are not many states of life, in which all knowledge less than the highest wisdom, will produce discontent and danger. ----- But such is the condition of humanity, that we easily see or quickly feel the wrong, but cannot always easily distinguish the right."

Johnson had a sense of the deeper meaning of Character, as it is supported and developed by religion. He had been reading "The Golden Remains" of the Reverend John Hales and on September 8th. 1783, he notes a reference to the Blessed Thomas Aquinas as follows, "He that doeth God the greatest service, and receives from Him the least reward, is the happiest man in the world". There goes a story of Aquinas, that praying once before the Crucifix, the Crucifix miraculously speaks thus to him, "Bene de me scripsisti Thoma, quam ergo mercedem accipies?" "Thou hast written well of me Thomas, what reward dost thou require desire?" To which Aquinas is made to answer, "Nullam, Domine, praeter Teipsum;" "no reward, Lord but thyself".

Dr. Livingstone of University College, Oxford, comparing the moral qualities of the ancient Greeks and Romans writes, "This age long struggle did not mould a tolerant character. Constancy, energy, resolution, massive weight were the qualities required from Roman citizens. Their strength was not to be the strength of pliancy; they were to be iron men". Emerson writing of Character observes "Those who listened to Lord Chatham felt that there was something finer in the man than anything he said". Samuel Johnson had these characteristics. We have studied him as a man of great Character and have discovered the foundation for this, not in

heredity of which we have no evidence, but in a sense of the reality of religion, first imparted to him as a boy by his mother. As a man in matters of religion he was always humble and maintained a firm faith. Those of us who are church people read daily during Advent this Collect composed by that great man Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, it is as follows, "Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen."

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The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson. Volume VI - Poems  
Yale University Press, Newhaven, Conn. and London. Price 72/-

This volume is a product worthy in every way of the distinguished group of scholars who have presented it to the world. One closes the book feeling that it will be for all time the supreme authority on the poems of Samuel Johnson. The notes and rough drafts of "Irene" and the poems given to the world for the first time in this volume will be of great interest and value to scholars, shewing as they do the way in which Johnson's mind worked when he was writing.

Students may sometimes seek to assess his value as a poet in relation to his great gifts as a writer of prose. Many will think of him as a writer of monumental prose who also produced a quantity of excellent verse - excellent because he had the gift of using words rather than that he felt the divine afflatus of the poet. His poems are "occasional pieces" celebrating a social event or a personal experience, not the result of sudden surges of emotion or super-normal consciousness.

But now there have come to light certain early poems written during his boyhood which suggest that if he had devoted his mental powers exclusively to poetry he might have developed an emotional character which would have raised his verse to a higher level of feeling than any of his mature works show. The first of his poems is entitled "On a Daffodil". It discloses a perception more akin to that of the Lake Poets of the succeeding age than to the more formal world which his mature writings portray. Then there is another of these juvenile efforts "Upon the Feast of St. Simon and

(continued on page 17)

DR. JOHNSON AND GIN

by

Ross Wilson, M.A., Th.L. Melbourne

When Samuel Johnson, accompanied by David Garrick, arrived in London in the spring of 1737 the gin craze was at its height. So close an observer of the scene, so intense and principled a moralist, so considerable a parliamentary reporter may have been expected to take notice of it. Yet Johnson has been remarkably objective, even kind, in his references to the beverage, both in his own written records and in those left by us by such as Boswell of his utterances.

His "London", an imitation of the third satire of Juvenal published the following year, 1738, for all its barbs at that city and its inhabitants, has no direct reference to gin. The nearest he comes to any form of accusation of alcoholic beverages is in the passage:

"Prepare for Death, if here at Night you roam,  
And sign your Will before you sup from Home.  
Some fiery Fop, with new Commission vain,  
Who sleeps on Brambles till he kills his Man,  
Some frolick Drunkard, reeling from a Feast,  
Provokes a Broil, and stabs you for a Jest".

That was in the year after his arrival in London.

Let us examine the origin and progress of that gin craze which reached its apogee in Johnson's first years in London. With the Dutchman William III on the throne waging economic war against France, the import of foreign brandy was either prohibited or heavily taxed while in 1690 a general permission was given to all to distil and retail spirits from home grown corn. For the next ten years the "patriotic" distillers were given every encouragement to develop the manufacture and sale of this "English brandy" and strong waters. Part of the justification given was that in this way "great quantities of the worst sort of malted corn, not useful to the brewers, hath been yearly consumed by those who set up works for the purpose". Parliament had made no provision spirits retailers to get a licence and "punch houses" and "dram shops" multiplied throughout London

and Westminster.

In 1701 these retailers had to get an alehouse licence from two justices of the peace but this was scrapped in the following year as it proved to be "a great hindrance to the consumption of English brandies". Its repeal meant that the distillers were free to open as many spirits shops as they liked and free sale was also permitted to "all other shop-keepers whose principal dealings shall be more in other goods and merchandises than in brandy or strong waters".

Pandemonium ensued: London and Westminster could boast six to seven thousand dram shops; cheap gin was given as wages; it was hawked about the streets on barrows, sold on market stalls, forced on servants at chandler's shops, peddled in suburban streets, distributed by watermen on the Thames, given free in bawdy houses. As "Theophilus" wrote in Cave's "The Gentleman's Magazine", a publication for which Johnson was shortly to do much work: "One half of the town seems set up to furnish poison to the other half".

In 1732 a complete and detailed survey of all the streets and houses in London was carried out by William Maitland, F.R.S., and out of a total of 95,968 houses he found the following:- brew houses, 171; inns, 207; taverns, 447; ale-houses, 5,975; brandy-shops, 8,659; total number of licensed houses for the retail sale of liquor, 15,288, of which considerably more than half were spirit bars. Brandy did not then mean exactly what we would understand by it today. It was a more generic term than anything and could be applied to any strong waters. The population at the time of Maitland's survey was three-quarters of a million. About one house in every six was licensed at the time.

Referring to the Licence Act of 1736. The Bishop of Salisbury described the scene which must have been familiar to Johnson, particularly as he roamed the streets, sleeping in sheds, without the money often to buy an adequate meal: "You can hardly pass along any street of this great city at any hour of the day, but you may see some poor creatures mad drunk with this liquor, and committing outrages in the street, or lying dead asleep upon bulks, or at the doors of empty houses. It is true that we have not now those public and open scenes of wickedness and debauchery that appeared in every gin-shop before the making of the law.....but the trade is carried on, though more privately, yet with as great excess as ever, and the reason we do not see more objects in streets is because most of them sleep out the dose in the private corner where they took it in".

For some unknown reason there was a departure from the policy in 1747 in that distillers were allowed to retail their spirits without any form of magistrates' licence. In his "Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers", published in 1751, the same year as saw Hogarth's "Beer Street" and "Gin Lane", Henry Fielding ascribed that increase to excessive gin drinking. "Gin", he wrote, "is the principal Sustenance (if it may be so called) of more than an hundred thousand people in this Metropolis. Many of these Wretches there are, who swallow Pints of this Poison within twenty-four Hours; the dreadful Effects of which I have the Misfortune every Day to see, and to smell too." More than seven million gallons of gin were drunk that year.

Fielding's protest was effective. As he added, "Should the drinking of this Poison be continued at its present height during the next Twenty years, there will, by that time, be very few of the common people left to drink it". Gin did not then, it has now become clearly apparent, possess the respectability and prestige it has today. There is nothing on record of Johnson's ever having tasted it. As Boswell himself said of those earliest years of the Doctor in London: "He at this time, I believe, abstained entirely from fermented liquors; a practice to which he rigidly conformed for many years together, at different periods of his life". Scotch whisky, we know, he sampled for the first time at an inn at Inveraray during his 1773 tour with Boswell, and he almost certainly drank brandy on occasion, and possibly a little Irish whiskey.

His brandy preference is well known. He was dining at Sir Josuah Reynold's in April 1779, "and spoke with great contempt of claret, as so weak, that 'a man could be drowned by it before it made him drunk'. He was persuaded to drink one glass of it, that he might judge, not from recollection, which might be dim, but from immediate sensation. He shook his head, and said, 'Poor stuff! No. Sir, claret is the liquor for boys; port for men, but he who aspires to be a hero (smiling) must drink brandy. In the first place, the flavour of brandy is most grateful to the palate; and then brandy will do soonest for a man what drinking can do for him. There are, indeed, few people who are able to drink brandy. That is a power rather to be wished than attained. And yet, (proceeded he), as in all pleasure hope is a considerable part, I know not but fruition comes too quick by brandy...". Johnson, then, was no anti-spirits man.

In the Dictionary he began by defining Geneva, the root word from which "gin" derives, as "(A corruption of genevre, French, a juniper berry.)



"We used to keep a distilled spirituous water of Juniper in the shops; but the making of it became the business of the distiller, who sold it under the name of geneva. At present only a better kind is distilled from the Juniper berry; what is commonly sold is made with no better ingredient than oil of turpentine, put into the still, with a little common salt, and the coarsest spirit they have, which is drawn off much below proof strength, and is consequently a liquor that one would wonder any people could accustom themselves to drink with pleasure".

Johnson's attitude, then, towards alcoholic beverages is quite impartial. And although from the time of his arrival in London until as late as 1757 - a period of some twenty years - Johnson rarely allowed himself anything stronger than tea, coffee and lemonade, he appreciated, indeed, loved the tavern and the inn. Did he not say, for instance, to Hawkins: "As soon as I enter the door of a tavern I experience an oblivion of care, and a freedom from solicitude; when I am seated, I find the master courteous, and the servants obsequious to my call; anxious to know and ready to supply my wants: wine there exhilarates my spirits, and prompts me to free conversation and an interchange of discourse with those whom I most love: I dogmatize and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight". Boswell bears many similar testimonies.

Boswell's first direct reference to gin in the "Life" occurs under the 13th. April, 1773, where Johnson is recorded as saying: "Let us take a walk from Charing Cross to Whitechapel, through, I suppose, the greatest series of shops in the world, what is there in any of these shops (if you except the gin shops) that can do any human being harm?" The implication, even at that late date in relation to the earlier gin craze, is at once apparent: gin could do harm, and thus the exception.

Gin and its companion beverages have most certainly come a long way since those days, have emerged from the social obloquy of the Doctor's day to an established position in the recognised hierarchy of national life. At least, he would not deny us a dram.

It may not be inappropriate to say something here on the manufacturing process of gin. It is, today, quite different from what it was in the Doctor's day. It was only as recently as 1831 that Aeneas Coffey, who had been Inspector-General of Excise in Ireland, patented his still, thereafter known as the patent still or Coffey still. The point about it is that it

does in one continuous operation what had previously been done in a series of interrupted operations in the traditional pot stills and produced a much more highly rectified spirit.

Let me explain in greater detail. The pot still was and is a copper pot seated on heat, a fire, an oil-burner, on coiled steam pipes, and so on. It is charged and the alcoholic vapours are condensed back to give us a more or less purified spirit. More or less. In the case of Scotch whiskey today the pot still spirit undergoes a double-distillation, and even then only the middle cut of the second distillate is accepted to set aside for maturing as whiskey. Now in the Doctor's day, distilling was, I fear, much cruder and rough and ready than today.

The spirit from the pot stills was often nauseous in flavour. The Dutch, to overcome this unpleasant flavour and make the spirit drinkable, added the commonest and cheapest berries available, those of the juniper, which grows very abundantly in the Netherlands.

Shannon, whose book on distilling was re-published in 1805 and was drawing on the experience of the Johnson age, wrote this about it: "To every piece of raw spirits received from the malt distiller, at one to ten over proof" - a handy if inaccurate manner of assessing strengths before the modern manner was evolved - "take two pounds of charcoal dust; one pound of plaster of Paris, finely powdered, and previously killed; three pounds of fullers' earth, previously slacked; clean water, four gallons; mix the plaster of Paris into thick batter with part of the water; add fullers' earth blended with water, of the same consistence; then stir in the charcoal, finely powdered; reduce them with the remainder of the water, and let an assistant stir them well up while pouring into the spirits, not only while this composition is adding, but for half an hour after; repeat the rousing every hour for four or five times; at the end of each rousing, if not performed in casks that are fixtures, roll the cask for a few minutes, and let it lay bund downward until the next rousing, all but the last time when it should be set up on end, with a cock placed near the bottom, and another a few inches below where the liquor rises to, to draw samples, every day for a few days, to compare with each other, and with samples of the same raw spirit. When the spirit appears cleansed of the flavour of the malt or grain, in both smell and taste, draw it off, and if intended for gin, to be made by agitation, make it up with lime-water, at one in six".

Or this one: "To seven hundred gallons of malt spirits at proof

a solution consisting of four pounds of grey salts (caustic potash) and four pounds of white salts (caustic potash as pearl ash) dissolved in two gallons of water were carefully charged in an ordinary pot still and carefully distilled over a slow fire". Sometimes, the alkali liquor was carefully filtered to remove sediment.

Then as to the distillation of the gin itself, let us take this representative recipe from Ambrose Cooper, whose "The Complete Distiller" was published in London in 1757: "Take of juniper berries, three pounds; proof spirits, ten gallons; water four gallons. Draw off by a gentle fire till the feints (the first vapours) begin to rise, and make up your goods to the strength required with clean water. The distillers generally call those goods which are made up proof, by the name of ROYAL".

Today, thanks to Coffey, the gin rectifier starts off with a purer spirit. This may be as high as 168 proof, and absolute alcohol is only around 175 proof. Even so, he reduces its strength with water and redistills it - carefully to get as silent, as tasteless and odourless spirit as possible. He then redistills the spirit with what we term the botanicals, the juniper berries, coriander seed, and so on. His recipe is always a closely guarded secret.

One last point of interest. Or what I hope may prove of interest. Coffey set himself up at Dock Distillery, Dublin - it has ceased to exist for years - and began running his still in 1832. He made no headway with it in Ireland and came over to Liverpool soon afterwards. From there, he came to London, the recognised centre of English gin distilling. Even there he did not make much progress, and with his patent running out after fourteen years, and struggling on for a little, he handed it over to his foreman, John Dore, with some little interest retained for himself and descendants. Today, the Dore family still control the business that Coffey set up. Until quite recently they were still in operation at Bromley-by-Bow and have just moved to Hainault. Dore's, as we all know them, have maintained their constant London gin distilleries near-monopoly by refurbishing all the London gin distilleries - as well as many others at home and abroad - in the post-war period especially.

## DR. JOHNSON ON THE ESSAY<sup>1</sup>.

by

James B. Misenheimer, Jr.,

Associate Professor of English

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Even if Dr. Johnson had chosen never to mention the essay anywhere in his criticism, the world would still know of the significance which he attached to this prose form. The seriousness with which he viewed it is evident to anyone who has examined Johnson's own writings, particularly "The Rambler" "The Idler", and "The Adventurer". His definition of the form, in the "Dictionary", as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition....."<sup>1</sup> reveals more his opinion of the majority of the essays that he had read and studied than it does his view of what this genre should be and what it should be and what it should undertake. The definition, however, also seems to imply a certain inherent flexibility not enjoyed by most of the literary types, though other of his comments on the purpose and place of the essay indicate his belief that flexibility in itself entails judicious responsibility. When Johnson wrote to Joseph Warton to ask him to contribute to "The Adventurer", he informed Warton that it had been decided that "a paper should consist of pieces of imagination, pictures of life, and disquisitions of literature."<sup>2</sup> He acknowledged, readily enough, that he had contributed to this decision; and it may be conjectured, of course, that he looked with especial favour upon the second of these potential essay subjects, "pictures of life". It was Johnson's way to view literature as a potent instructional force, and for him the essay was no exception. At the same time that he wrote essays of moral guidance and amplitude, he could commend the levity and the informality of such writers as Addison and Steele, who had undertaken to introduce philosophy at the tea-table and to reform societal manners with gentle nudges and easeful portraits. He recognised the essay as a prose form which could serve a diversity of instructive purposes; and he was sufficiently knowledgeable in the art of literature to realise that "he who endeavours to gain many readers must try various arts of invitation, essay every avenue of pleasure, and make frequent changes in his methods of approach".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Read at the Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Fort Collins, Colorado. October 3rd., 1965

Johnson believed that the innate flexibility of this genre gave it certain unusual advantages over the other literary forms. Among these were its wide circulation in periodical format, its adaptability to public taste and circumstances, and its brevity.<sup>4</sup> The essayist, too, had an advantage over other authors, as Johnson observes in "The Rambler", No. 184:

The writer of essays escapes many embarrassments to which a large work would have exposed him; he seldom harasses his reason with long trains of consequences, dims his eyes with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens his memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge. A careless glance upon a favourite author, or transient survey of the varieties of life, is sufficient to supply the first hint or seminal idea, which, enlarged by the gradual accretion of matter stored in the mind, is by the warmth of fancy easily expanded into flowers, and sometimes ripened into fruit.<sup>5</sup>

Such factors as these contributed to the uniqueness of the basic nature of the essay and to its particular suitability for filling a serious void in the area of social instruction known as "propriety". Thus Johnson viewed it not only as a vehicle for especially sober moral discourse, but also as the ideal literary form for teaching the public how to reform its manners as well as its conversation:

Before "The Tatler" and "Spectator", if the writers for the theatre are excepted, England had no masters of common life. No writers had yet undertaken to reform either the savageness of neglect or the impertinence of civility; to shew when to speak, or to be silent; how to refuse, or how to comply. We had many books to teach us more important duties, and to settle opinions in philosophy or politicks; but an Arbiter elegantiarum, a judge of propriety, was yet wanting, who should survey the track of daily conversation and free it from thorns and prickles, which tease the passer, though they do not wound him.

For this purpose nothing is so proper as the frequent publication of short papers, which we read not as study but amusement. If the subject be slight, the treatise is likewise short. The busy may find time, and the idle may find patience.<sup>6</sup>

The subject matter of Johnson's essays themselves suggests that he was not in favour of restricting this genre to either light or grave instruction, but rather that he saw within it the possibilities of presenting and pursuing

both. That he was capable of deciphering and willing to expose any abuses of the essay form, in its attractive versatility, is quite evident from his indictment, in "The Rambler", No. 158, of an unnamed author who paraded his licentiousness under the guise of brief, witty dissertations:

A writer of later times has, by the vivacity of his essays, reconciled mankind to the same licentiousness in short dissertations (as in the lyric); and he therefore who wants skill to form a plan, or diligence to pursue it, needs only intitle his performance an essay, to acquire the right of heaping together the collections of half his life, without order, coherence, or propriety.

In writing, as in life, faults are endured without disgust when they are associated with transcendent merit, and may be sometimes recommended to weak judgments by the lustre which they obtain from their union with excellence; but it is the business of those who presume to superintend the taste of morals of mankind, to separate delusive combinations, and distinguish that which may be praised from that which can only be excused. . . . . To proceed from one truth to another, and connect distant propositions by regular consequences, is the great prerogative of man. Independent and unconnected sentiments flashing upon the mind in quick succession, may, for a time, delight by their novelty, but they differ from systematical reasoning, as single notes from harmony, as glances of lightning from the radiance of the sun.

Johnson's practical criticism of the essay is best in evidence in his observations on the work of Sir Francis Bacon and of Addison and Steele. In "The Rambler", No. 106, he says of Bacon: "Bacon. . . . . seems to have pleased himself chiefly with his Essays, which come home to men's business and bosoms, and of which, therefore, he declares his expectation, that they will live as long as books last." <sup>8</sup> It is appropriate to note that Bacon, who was one of Johnson's favourite authors, appears frequently in quotation in the "Dictionary" and that Johnson once remarked to Burke that the excellence and the value of Bacon's essays "consisted in being the observations of a strong mind operating upon life; and in consequence you find there what you seldom find in other books." <sup>9</sup>

Of Addison, his criticism is equally favourable. He acknowledges the influence of "The Spectator" on contemporary conversation and admires the strictures of manners with which many of the essays deal. <sup>10</sup> He recommends to aspiring authors of prose Addison's avoidance of "all harshness and severity of diction": "What he attempted, he performed;



he is never feeble, and he did not wish to be energetick; he is never rapid, and he never stagnates . . . . . Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."<sup>11</sup> He commends Addison's study and depiction of human nature and pronounces his morality as "neither dangerously lax, nor impracticably rigid".<sup>12</sup> And he praises "The Guardian" and "The Spectator" for their "nice discrimination of characters, and accurate observation of natural or accidental deviations from propriety."<sup>13</sup> Beneath Addison's somewhat informal exterior, Johnson sees a stability and an essential sanity which, he feels, will no doubt grant these essays a lasting influence and a wide acclaim. The writings of Steele, in comparison, are weak: "They are too thin . . . . . for an Englishman's taste: mere superficial observations on life and manners, without erudition enough to make them keep, like the light French wines, which turn sour with standing a while for want of body, as we call it".<sup>14</sup>

In his criticism of the essay, then, Johnson reflects upon the potential office of the genre as being alternately serious and light but always beneficial and educative with respect to its audience, the reader; and the essays of Bacon and of Addison and Steele are, respectively, a virtual exemplification of the twofold approach which the essayist can take. Bacon chose essentially the formal, direct, hard-hitting path of instruction, hardly diluted and, more often than not, extremely pertinent and applicable to the deepest problems of the human condition. Addison and Steele, generally speaking, were less formal, sometimes gay, yet very perceptive in their analyses of social behaviour and the shades of human character. To Johnson, for the essay to be nothing more than "a loose sally of the mind" was an inexcusable and deplorable waste; if it was a "sally of the mind" at all, then it should at least take a significant step toward remedying social discrepancies, if not toward relieving and satisfying the mental and moral quests of the human spirit.

#### Documentation

1. Samuel Johnson, "A Dictionary of the English Language", 2nd ed. (London, 1755), I, fol. 8H, leaf 1<sup>r</sup>, definition 2.
2. James Boswell, "Life of Johnson", ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enl. by Lawrence F. Powell (Oxford, 1934-50), I, 253.
3. Samuel Johnson, "The Rambler", No. 23, "The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.", ed. Arthur Murphy (London, 1801), IV, 154.

4. "The Rambler", No. 1, IV, 6-7.
5. "The Rambler", No. 184, VI, 254.
6. Samuel Johnson, "Life of Addison", "Lives of the English Poets", ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), II, 93.
7. "The Rambler", No. 158, VI, 109-110.
8. "The Rambler", No. 106, V, 226.
9. "Johnsonian Miscellanies", arr. and ed. by George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1897), II, 229.
10. "Life of Addison", "Lives", II, 95-96.
11. "Life of Addison", "Lives", II, 149-150.
12. "Life of Addison", "Lives", II, 148-149.
13. "Life of Addison", "Lives", II, 106.
14. "Johnsonian Miscellanies", I, 187.

(continued from page 6)

"St. Jude" which recounts the legend recorded by Archbishop Ussher that St. Simon came to Britain where he was crucified and buried. This suggests that the young poet may have felt an uprising of that romantic religious emotion which centres on Glastonbury, and which found its fulfilment in the work of a later laureate and the Legend of the Grail.

A footnote to "London" touches on the question of whether "Thales" represents Richard Savage. This view is widely held, but it is denied by some scholars on the grounds that Johnson had not met Savage when the poem was written. The epigram "Ad Ricardum Savage" which was printed in 1738 is no proof that the two men had met at the time; and although Hawkins believed that "Thales" was inspired by Savage, Boswell was equally sure that this was not so. Perhaps although Thales at the time of composition was merely "Umbricius" in modern guise, yet the short but emotional friendship which culminated in the tearful farewell may have caused Johnson to see in Savage a type of the Roman exile.

Finally, how did Johnson regard himself - as a poet, or as a prose writer who also produced poems? Boswell tells us that a few days before his death he asked Hawkins where he should be buried, and on being answered "Doubtless in Westminster Abbey" he seemed to feel a satisfaction very natural to a poet.

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DR. JOHNSON - CIVIL ENGINEER

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by

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Dr. Johnson is known for his ability to "get up" an unfamiliar subject by reading and conversation and speak with seeming authority on it, though Boswell, glancing at his own profession, remarked that: His employing his powers of reasoning and eloquence upon a subject which he had studied on the moment, is not more strange than what we often observe in lawyers, who, as quicquid agunt homines in the matter of lawsuits, are sometimes obliged to pick up temporary knowledge of an art or science, of which they understood nothing till their brief was delivered, and appear to be much masters of it. Boswell here is commenting upon Johnson's vigorously authoritative contributions in December 1759 to a technical argument over the plans for a bridge at Blackfriars. This was one of Johnson's more unlikely briefs, and one which strikingly revealed his ability "to pick up a temporary knowledge of an art or science" - and its limits.

Old London Bridge may have been "almost art's wonder for strength, length, beauty, wideness, height," but the commerce of expanding 18th. Century London called for more bridges across the Thames. Westminster Bridge had been opened in 1750, its construction supervised by the "Architect Earl" of Pembroke who, in a typically Augustan fashion, combined the roles of aristocratic arbiter of taste, practical engineer and business man. This event gave impetus to bridge building all over the country, and particularly in London where a new link was soon projected - this time between the Ludgate end of Fleet Street and Southwark. The moving spirits behind this scheme were the bankers, merchants and industrialists of London, and in 1756 they obtained an Act of Parliament empowering the City Council to build the bridge. An open competition for plans brought forward no fewer than sixty-nine entries, but by the end of 1759 the City's Bridge Committee had reduced the number of eligible plans to three - those submitted by John Gwynn, by John Smeaton, and by Robert Mylne. Gwynn, born at Shrewsbury in 1713, was the oldest of the three. In 1755 he was a member of a committee formed to create "a Royal Academy of London for the improvement of painting, sculpture, and architecture" and in the same year

he was offered an appointment as instructor in architecture to the future George III. By 1759 he was well known as a writer on architecture and as a draughtsman. Smeaton, a Yorkshireman born 1724, was one of the new race of civil engineers and in October 1759 had completed what was to be his greatest work - the third Eddystone lighthouse. He had been a Fellow of the Royal Society since 1753. Gwynn and Smeaton were well established, but the Scotsman Mylne, aged twenty-six, youngest of all the candidates and a last-minute entrant into the competition, was virtually unknown. In 1759 he had just arrived in London after studying at St. Luke's Academy in Rome where he had earned the unique distinction for a Briton of winning both the gold and the silver medals for architecture. In Rome he had gained also the friendship of Piranesi, already famous as the publicist of Roman architecture, ancient and modern. Mylne's design for Blackfriars Bridge revealed the influence of Piranesi in its stern Roman grandeur; it was undoubtedly neo-classic, but in one feature it was thought to be revolutionary. Where Smeaton and Gwynn had drawn semi-circular arches like those of Westminster Bridge, Mylne had preferred semi-elliptical. From this circumstance sprang the "Battle of the Arches" into which Johnson plunged.

On 1, 8 and 15 December 1759 "The Gazeteer" printed unsigned letters from Johnson opposing Mylne's design. Johnson's motive was probably to help his friend Gwynn obtain the contract, but both men may have resented the all too evident ambition of this very youthful, proud, pushing Scotsman. Mylne's obscurity and inexperience when compared with Gwynn and Smeaton is obliquely hinted at in the very first phrases of the first letter: The plans which have been offered by different architects of different reputation and abilities, for the Construction of the Bridge intended to be built at Blackfriars. But Johnson soon turns from persons to principles, and promptly narrows his subject to the comparative strengths of the semi-circular and the semi-elliptical arch. He makes a characteristic appeal to his readers' common understanding: Those who are acquainted with the mathematical principles of architecture, are not many; and yet fewer are they who will, upon any single occasion, endure any laborious stretch of thought, or harass their minds with unaccustomed investigations. We shall therefore attempt to show the weakness of the elliptical arch, by arguments which appeal simply to common reason, and which will yet stand the test of geometrical examination. Johnson refutes Mylne as he had refuted Berkeley - by reference to the shape and hardness of a stone, but in this case a wedge-shaped block, or voussoir. He spells out his argument in a manner that should make it clear to the meanest understanding: Any weight laid upon the top of an

arch, has a tendency to force that top into the vacuity below; and the arch thus loaded on the top, stands only because the stones that form it, being wider in the upper than in the lower parts, that part that fills a wider space cannot fall through a space less wide; but the force which laid upon a flat would press directly downwards, is dispersed each way in a lateral direction, as the parts of a beam are pushed out to the right and left by a wedge driven between them. This is obvious and pertinent, but what immediately follows is partly irrelevant and partly false: In proportion as the stones are wider at the top than at the bottom, they can less easily be forced downwards, and as their lateral surfaces tend more from the centre to each side, to so much more is the pressure directed laterally towards the piers, and so much less perpendicularly towards the vacuity. Upon this plain principle the semi-circular arch may be demonstrated to excel in strength the elliptical arch, which approaching nearer to a strait line, must be constructed with stones whose diminution downwards is very little, and of which the pressure is almost perpendicular. However, the amount of taper on each stone will depend not solely upon the shape of the arch but also upon the number and size of the stones and, above all, upon the width of the arch. In 1750 William Edwards had built Pont-y-Pridd over the river Taff. His single 140 foot span was the segment of a circle 170 feet in diameter, which on Johnson's reckoning would be much closer to a straight line than the biggest arch in Mylne's plan which was half of an ellipse eighty feet by a hundred. In any case Johnson's "plain principle" is wrong. A very slightly tapered stone at the summit of an arch will direct more pressure laterally than will a stone more considerably tapered. Now Johnson alludes to the arguments of his opponents, who are comprised by the characteristic abstraction "hardy ignorance": It has yet been sometimes asserted by hardy ignorance, that the elliptical arch is stronger than the semi-circular; or in other terms, that any mass is more strongly supported the less it rests upon the supporters.

Johnson offers a garbled version of a correct principle. A bridge of flatter arches, whether semi-elliptical or segmental, rests less upon its intermediate supporters - the piers standing in the river - because it transmits more thrust outwards onto the abutments which can be made heavy and firm on each river bank. The arch becomes in a sense a dynamic thing, "the flying arch". The piers carry less weight, they are fewer, each is lighter and narrower, and they will stand more firmly on account of this because they will obstruct the river's current less and their foundations therefore will be less subject to the scouring effect of eddying sand in the river bed. The more ponderous piers required by the semi-circular arch with its heavy downward thrust will cause more obstruction, stronger eddies,

and so suffer more wear at their foundations. All this is in the realm of practical engineering and has no part in Johnson's "mathematical principles of architecture". Having stated his opponents argument in this form he "logically" extends it in order to prove its absurdity: If the elliptical arch be equally strong with the semi-circular, that is, if an arch by approaching to a strait line, loses none of its stability, it will follow, that all arcuation is useless, and that the bridge may at last, without any inconvenience, consist of stone laid in straight lines from pillar to pillar. But had Johnson been less securely imprisoned in the logic of abstractions he would have seen that for practical purposes in bridge-building there is all the difference in the world between a slight arcuation and a straight line.

Johnson now turns from his theoretical proof to drive home with triumphant italics his practical proof - the only bridge ever built with a semi-elliptical arch "has now stood two hundred years without imitation". He refers to a bridge built in 1566 over the Arno in Florence, but he is wrong when he claims that it stood without imitation. The semi-elliptical arch had been used not infrequently by French bridge builders in the seventy years or so before Mylne's design, and it is indicative of the comparative backwardness of British civil engineering before the later eighteenth-century that so many men knew as little as Johnson did about French practice. The segmental arch, which Johnson leaves out of consideration altogether, had been fairly common all over Europe, including Britain, since the Middle Ages.

His argument concluded, Johnson, preserving his measured cadence and authoritative manner, gives himself over to a kind of innuendo not far removed from Grub Street: If in opposition to these arguments, and in defiance at once of right reason and general authority, the elliptical arch should at last be chosen, what will the world believe, than that some other motive than reason influenced the determination? And some degree of partiality cannot but be suspected by him, who has been told that one of the judges appointed to decide this question, is Mr. M-l-l-r, who having, by ignorance or thoughtlessness, already preferred the elliptical arch, will probably think himself obliged to maintain his own judgment, though his opinion will avail but little with the publick, when it is known that Mr. S-ps-n declares it to be false. John Millar, referred to here, was an architect, whereas Thomas Simpson was a mathematician, a Midlander like Gwynn and Johnson, and a man whose early skill in astrology had earned him the title of "the oracle of Nuneaton, Bosworth and the



environs". In his second letter Johnson rests upon his argument that the semi-elliptical arch is per se weak, and argues on æsthetic grounds against the ellipse and against certain ornamental features of Mylne's design. At the end of the letter he depreciates Mylne and slights Rome as a centre for architectural study: That Mr. M----- obtained the prize of the architecture at Rome, a few months ago, is willingly confessed; nor do his opponents doubt that he obtained it by deserving it. May he continue to obtain whatever he deserves; but let it not be presumed that a prize granted at Rome, implies an irresistible degree of skill. The competition is only between boys, and the prize given to excite laudable industry, not to reward consummate excellence. Nor will the suffrage of the Romans much advance any name among those who know, what no man of science will deny, that architecture has for some time degenerated at Rome to the lowest state. This is less than magnanimous. The third letter opens with a characteristically splendid generalization: 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. Johnson goes on to maul good-humouredly what would appear to have been a very inept case put up by another correspondent of "The Gazeteer", and concludes with a recommendation "to those who may still doubt which of the two arches is the stronger, to press an egg first on the ends, and then upon the sides". Thus Johnson's final proof is experimental. The experiment is irrelevant, and the sudden burst of pragmatism is out of keeping with what has gone before. It would be unjust to charge Johnson with "the cant of those who judge by principles rather than perception", for in fairness it should be remembered that in 1759 there was not nearly as much practical information about stone bridge building available in England as there was upon the Continent, but he still argues in a inflexible way, imprisoned within his own geometrical abstractions.

Despite objections by Johnson and others, Mylne's design was accepted, though attacks on it continued. Broadsheets of 1760 described Mylne as "Just Arriv'd from Italy, the Puffing Phænomenon, with his Fiery Tail Turn'd Bridge-Builder" and implied that he owed his success to the influence of that least popular of Scotsmen - Lord Bute. In Book IV of "The Ghost" (1763) Charles Churchill attacked "Mylne, a man unknown". A year earlier Johnson, under the title of "Pomposo" had been one of Churchill's targets, and it may be that Churchill's attack helped to convince Johnson that Mylne was not such a bad fellow after all. Mylne appears on the edge of Johnson's circle of friends in the 1770's, introduced,

presumably by his countryman Boswell, who had seen him as a rising man and had cultivated his acquaintance during the building of the bridge. The bridge was at last opened in 1769 and was generally admired. Hawkins poured scorn upon it in his "Life of Johnson", but Boswell, with all too evident satisfaction, contradicted him in a long footnote in his own "Life of Johnson". Thus the Battle of the Arches was briefly fought again as a skirmish in the Battle of the Biographers.

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Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings. by R.T. Davies, (Faber & Faber 1965) pp. 398. Price 45/- net.

In reviewing a selection of Johnson's writings one inevitably compares it with Dr. R.W. Chapman's selection in *Worlds Classics* and that of Mona Wilson in *Nonsuch*; and one looks for a selection that will amplify but not supplant the others. This book fulfills all requirements admirably.

It is conveniently arranged in two parts, Poems and Prose, each set out in chronological order. The Poems begin with "To Miss Hickman playing on the spinet" and ends with the last poem dated November 1784, a translation of Horace, Odes IV, vii. The Prose begins with the Preface to Fr. Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* and ends appropriately, with the last prayer. There are 26 essays from the "Rambler" 5 from the "Adventurer", and 8 from the "Idler"; some letters; extracts from Prayers and Meditations, from "The Dictionary" and the "Shakespeare", from "Rasselas", and from the "Lives of the Poets". One has looked in vain elsewhere for something from the *Life of Sir Thomas Browne*, and here is an extract. Very few of the essays chosen appear in Dr. Chapman's selection.

Mr. Davies has written an excellent Introduction in four parts dealing with Johnson's life, his works, his theory of literary criticism, and his prose style. The short biographical study is brilliantly done and the book is worth having for the Introduction alone. Observations and criticisms made in the Introduction are supported and justified by reference to specific works in the text. Each item in the selection is introduced by a useful head-note explaining the occasion and background of the selected passage and containing some piquant flashes of comment on Johnson or his work. In addition helpful foot-notes explain words and phrases where explanation is needed, a most interesting feature of which are definitions from Johnson's Dictionary. The book is attractively printed on good paper and is fully worthy of standing beside Dr. Chapman.

Lewis Raddon.