

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES BOSWELL

AMID the respectable, sedate, though genial company of men of letters in Edinburgh, who had their humorous ways, their frugal means, and sober refectations at dinner and supper, there bustled by day, and issued noisily from tavern by night, the pompous, fussy, self-important figure of Mr. James Boswell, advocate. His eyes goggled with a humorous twinkle which belied the air of portentous seriousness in his pursy mouth; his cheeks were baggy as half-filled wine-skins; his face was rubicund with frequent hock, and his figure paunchy from sumptuous fare. There was a curious serio-comic air about this person who was anxious to be a personage. He was at ease in all companies, and could suit himself to any society: grave with learned lords, roystering with rakish blades, ready to talk history with Principal Robertson and cock-fighting with Deacon Brodie, to discuss moral principles with Dr. Johnson and exchange badinage with neither principles nor morals with Jack Wilkes, eager to enter St. Paul's with deepest emotion on Good Friday and to come out of the Soaping Club any Friday night vocal with fatuous songs. Inquisitive as Paul Pry, no rebuff could daunt him and no reserve repress him. Nothing "put him out"; there was never anything embarrassed about him - except his affairs. He was considered by his Edinburgh friends, withal, a pleasant rattle, an entertaining companion, a clever fellow, gifted with boundless literary ambition. His early inane productions, however, did not cause any man of letters to dream that this idle, tattling, bibulous lawyer, without law, would one day produce a work destined to be immortal, when their own books, so admired, so celebrated in their day, were dead and forgotten.

Never was the law of heredity more impudently flouted than by the irrepressible, irresponsible son of a stolid Scots judge, as if he had been produced by nature in one of her most facetious moods. Lord Auchinleck was a heavy, solid character, who spoke much good sense in uncouth Scots, and much good law in very bad English. Plain-spoken, he could call a spade a spade, though, being



JAMES BOSWELL

From the Portrait by Dance in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

JAMES BOSWELL

vernacular, he called a spade a “shule.” Gifted with a rough tongue and caustic humour, there was a salt in his sentences and a vigour in his contempts under which his errant son James had often cause to wince. That this clumsy, plain senator and laird had in his youth followed the pranks of fashion at which he snorted gibes in his old age, seemed so deliciously incongruous that when it was told that Auchinleck, after studying law abroad, had sported red-heeled shoes and red stockings, his son nearly fell off his chair with most irreverent laughter. [Ramsay’s *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 161.]

One follows the career and studies the character of Mr. James Boswell with regretful amusement. Born in 1740 in Edinburgh, tutored by the worthy minister of Auchinleck, educated at the High School and Edinburgh College, he showed, before he was out of his teens, that he was “happily possessed of a facility of manners,” [Ramsay’s *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 161.] as, to his satisfaction, Mr. Adam Smith informed him. We find him at the early age of eighteen assuming the airs of a man of letters, and describing to his friend Temple, with delightful complacency, his introduction to Mr. David Hume, “the most affable, discreet man as ever I met with, and has really a great deal of learning. We talked of genius, fine language, improving our style, etc., but I am afraid solid learning is much worn out.” [*Letters between Hon. A. Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.*, 1762, p. 41.] Thus does the *blasé* youth of venerable eighteen give his verdict on literature; and yet he was at the time attending the lodging of Mr. Love the actor, humbly to learn elementary elocution and a decent pronunciation of the English tongue. The result of the instructions of the impecunious gentleman, who took his fees and borrowed his money, we can guess from Dr. Johnson’s dubious praise of his young friend’s attempts at English accents: “Sir, your pronunciation is not often offensive.”

Was it to keep the facile youth from the temptations of the capital, its play-actors and its taverns, that Lord Auchinleck sent his son to college in the demure city of Glasgow? If so, the result was a lamentable failure. While James Boswell was attending Adam Smith’s stimulating lectures on ethics in the University, he was also attending theatres and mixing with actors, and, fascinated with popery, attending worship in the Roman Catholic chapel. His studies on moral philosophy, and interest in the drama and the chapel, ended in his running off to London with an actress of the Roman Catholic persuasion. His indignant father followed his errant son in a rage, and a post-chaise, and there was at first more difficulty in persuading him to give up his new creed than his mistress. Sir John Pringle, the eminent physician and ex-moral philosopher of Edinburgh, was engaged to reason

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

with the youth. He pointed out that the papistry would ruin his prospects, that he would never succeed at the Bar, never be a sheriff, far less a judge. Bozzy grandiosely maintained that he cared not for his earthly prospects, but for the safety of his immortal soul. "Your immortal soul, sir!" the quondam Professor of Moral Philosophy is alleged to have exclaimed; "why, any one with the smallest spark of gentlemanly spirit would rather be damned to all eternity than give his relations and friends so much trouble as you are doing now!" [Grant Duff's *Notes of a Diary*, 1873-1881, i. 194; on J. Hill Burton's authority.] Whether these fine moral considerations weighed with him or not, the ailment of Catholicism passed away; and as for the nameless charmer, like Mr. Gibbon he sighed as a lover and obeyed like a son.

While he was in London he determined to see life, and found a disreputable companion in Samuel Derrick. This friend dabbled in poetry and in drink, and was not unfamiliar with a night in a gutter after an evening in a tavern - which did not disqualify him for succeeding Beau Nash as Master of Ceremonies at Bath, when, attired in the height of fashion, he would walk out attended by a man in livery, and carefully cross and recross the streets to show everybody that he kept a footman.

[Taylor's *Records of my Life*, i. 9.]

Lord Eglinton rescued his young friend from such shabby company, and he was introduced to the *beau monde*, in which he naturally chose rakes that misled him, seasoned heads that out-drunk him, and wild bloods at Newmarket who laughed at him. Profoundly unconscious of being a fool, he printed a fatuous doggerel piece, the "Cub of Newmarket" - of which he is the "Cub" and the hero - and dedicated it to the fiddling Duke of York. How coarse, how grossly provincial now seemed Edinburgh to the youth living in fine society! "How horrible," as he observed to the confidant of all his sillinesses, "to conform to every Scottish custom"; to hear once more the terrible, broad, familiar accents asking, "Will ye hae some jeel [the atrociously vulgar form for jelly]?" Why, consorting with such dull company was "like yoking a Newmarket winner to a dung-cart." [Boswell's *Letters*, p. 14.]

Back, however, he must come to the parental roof and the paternal reprimands, and begin to study law. But there were still pleasures for him, to which he condescended; there were meetings of the Soaping Club, with its idiotic motto, "Every man soap his own beard" - supposed equivalent for "Every man in his own humour" - with its alluring game of "snip-snap-snorum," its jovial drinking, and its junketing at Tom Nicholson's dingy tavern at the West Bow. For this bibulous brotherhood the youthful Boswell, as worshipful laureate, wrote songs, and lustily sang them, as in these strains:

JAMES BOSWELL

Boswell, of Soapers the King,
On Tuesdays at Tom's does appear,
And when he does talk and does sing,
To him ne'er a one can come near.

He talks with such ease and such grace,
That all charmed to attention do sit,
And he sings with such comic a face,
That our sides are just ready to split.

Then, after plentiful carousing, he and his comrades would walk home, rolling out Bacchanalian lays at the full pitch of their voices. Was there ever such a preposterous youth? His literary vanity he was meanwhile indulging by writing rigmorole "occasional verses," which he printed with puffing epistles by friends; and perpetrating an "Ode to Tragedy," which he published anonymously and dedicated "To James Boswell, Esquire" - to himself!

It was in 1763 that he set forth from Auchinleck, in Ayrshire, to London on an ever-memorable journey. He had thoughts of entering the Guards - he liked its uniform and its high society - though never of "heroic blood"; but this scheme fell through. His father had given him a growling permission and sardonic counsel, and the youth of twenty-two years departed, attired in "a cocked hat and brown wig, a brown coat made in court fashion, a red vest, corduroy small clothes, long military-looking boots, with his servant riding at most aristocratic distance behind." [*Edinburgh Literary Journal*, ii. 327.] Arriving in London, he sought out former friends and familiar haunts; but there was one great object now looming in his mind - that was to meet Mr. Samuel Johnson. Three years ago he was riding in a chaise with his father and Sir David Dalrymple (afterwards Lord Hailes), the advocate-depute, when they were on circuit. On that occasion Sir David spoke to his young friend of Mr. Johnson as a great writer in London. "This grew up," says Bozzy grandly, "in my fancy into a mysterious veneration, by feigning to myself a solemn, elevated abstraction in which I supposed him to live in the immense metropolis of London." Now the hour and the man arrived. He had made acquaintance with Mr. Thomas Davies, the old actor, now bookseller in Great Russell Street, who knew the lexicographer well, and could copy his big voice and uncouth gestures to the life. Perhaps, too, Boswell was a little attracted to the shop by the presence of Mrs. Davies, who had also been on the stage; and as he walked towards Covent Garden the lines of Churchill may have been softly murmured by him, "Upon my life, Tom

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Davies has a very pretty wife.”

“It was on Monday, the 16th of May,” he records, “when I was sitting in Mr. Davies’ back parlour, after having drank tea with him and Mrs. Davies, Johnson unexpectedly came into the shop, and Mr. Davies, having perceived him through the glass door in the room in which we were sitting, advancing towards us, he announced his awful approach to me. . . . Mr. Davies mentioned my name, and respectfully introduced me. I was much agitated, and recollecting his prejudices against the Scotch, I said to Davies, “Don’t tell where I come from.” “*From Scotland,*” cried Davies roguishly. “Mr. Johnson,” said I, “I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.” “That, sir, I find is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help.” At which retort the apologetic Scotsman owns he was “a good deal stunned.” The interview ended in the youth - obsequious and reverential - ingratiating himself with the great man, whose friendship he was determined to cultivate. Calling at his house in the Temple, he found the illustrious man in his shabby chambers, clad in rusty brown suit, little, old, shrivelled, unpowdered wig, the shirt neck and knees of his breeches untied, his black worsted stockings half drawn up, displaying inches of his bare calves, and his feet shod in an old pair of unbuckled shoes. In this abode Boswell made himself agreeable and deferential. He flattered the great man, pleased the blind poetess, Mrs. Williams, who was sheltered under his roof; took copious dishes of tea (in each of which the lady stuck a not immaculate finger to feel if it was full) and drank them as draughts Heliconian. He was careful of Hodge, the cat that purred on the Doctor’s knee; attentive to Francis Barber, the black servant that opened the Doctor’s door. He stimulated his distinguished friend to talk, and when he got home, wrote down everything he had said.

These strangely assorted companions - the Scots rake of twenty-two and the English moralist of sixty - soon went everywhere together. (“Sir, I love you,” the great man said to his parasite.) They met at the Mitre and the Turk’s Head, where wits did congregate. Wonder arose among Johnson’s friends who this new acquaintance might be. “Who is this Scots cur at Johnson’s heels?” some one asked of Goldsmith. “Not a cur but a burr,” answered Oliver; “Tom Davies flung him at Johnson in sport, and he has the faculty of sticking.” [Forster’s *Life of Goldsmith*, i. 330.]

While the young man was frequenting Johnsonian company, Lord Auchinleck was waxing wroth at his son wasting his time instead of studying law. Nor can his stolid soul have been pacified by a preposterous publication, *Letters between the Hon. Andrew Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.*, which came forth in

JAMES BOSWELL

1763 - rollicking letters such as two silly young blades might write, and only two young fools could publish. Ominous threats came from the irate judge, and to soften his obdurate heart the son wrote pleadingly to Sir David Dalrymple to intercede. "I thank God I ever got acquainted with Mr. Johnson. He has assisted me to obtain peace of mind, and he has assisted me to become a rational Christian. I hope I shall ever remain so." His lordship, whatever his thoughts of the likelihood of Jamie being a "Christian," must have had his grim doubts of his son's chances of ever being a "rational" one. There was, however, some satisfaction that his unstable offspring had so respectable a mentor in Mr. Johnson, whose counsels regarding a project of his travelling abroad were retailed to Sir David. "He is a great enemy to a settled plan of study. He advises me to go to places where there is most to be seen and learned. He would have me perambulate (a word of his own style) Spain," and so on. Thus did Boswell write to his learned friend, with the adroit purpose of dissuading his father from sending him to a dull Dutch college. In pursuance of parental desire, however, James Boswell started forth to prosecute his law studies at Utrecht for two years, under the laborious Professor Trotz - his distinguished friend going to Harwich to see him embark; and Bozzy tells how he kept his eyes fixed upon the sage as the ship sailed off, while "he rolled his majestic frame" on the shore.

Legal studies did not detain Boswell beyond a year in the sleepy Dutch city; he yawned as good Trotz ponderously delivered his Latin lectures on the "Pandects," wearied of Batavian-built *wrovs* and their husbands, with portly forms, and "clothes which they wore as if they were luggage." So he set forth on farther travels to "perambulate" Europe on a comfortable allowance of £240 a year. We see him at the British Embassy at Berlin, where his father's friend, Sir Andrew Mitchell, was representative, mixing, in bland assurance, with diplomatists and dignitaries of all sorts and countries; then travelling in Italy with Lord Mountstuart, who admired his "noble sentiments"; at length he reached Corsica, where Paoli was fighting for the independence of his country. Bozzy's vanity was flattered by the rumour that he was a secret envoy from Great Britain, and he posed, with imperturbable composure, as a great man; had guards to attend him, and charmed the natives by wearing the Corsican costume and singing Scots ballads and Jolly Tar songs about "Hearts of Oak." He won his resistless way - with a letter of introduction from Rousseau, to whom he had ingratiated himself at Neuchâtel - into General Paoli's home and confidence; plied him with "ten thousand questions," of which the simple-hearted hero did not perceive the supreme impertinence. Years

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

ago his play-acting, sponging friend, Mr. Love, had advised him to keep an exact diary of what he said and heard. This plan he had tried on Lord Hailes; now he practised it on the patriot, as he was doing with Dr. Johnson, and his notebook was filled nightly with his records. He left the island with great enthusiasm for the people, and with large materials for a book; and at last returned home, having visited Rousseau at Neuchâtel, where he heard his diatribes against everybody; having seen Voltaire at Ferney, where he was regaled with epigrams from the weazened old satirist.

He crossed the Channel, taking charge of Thérèse la Vasseur, who was on her way to rejoin Rousseau, whom David Hume had, to his cost, brought over to England. See him now in London, inflated by his adventures, and getting himself announced in the newspapers as “Mr. Boswell, the celebrated traveller”; and in his ridiculous Corsican attire waiting on Mr. Pitt, who received with courtesy and well-preserved gravity this the only Briton who could give news of that island, which involved political interests. The stupendous confidence of the youth was shown by his beginning a correspondence with the “Great Commoner,” and begging the pleasure of “hearing from him now and then.” Nothing did he talk of but his great travels and the noble Paoli, till Dr. Johnson could stand it no longer, and bade him “get Corsica out of his head.”

At last the prodigal returned home, receiving a welcome not quite scriptural from his father, who further was disgusted by this fuss over a “land-loupin’ chief,” and growled to his friends that “Jamie has begun a toot on a new horn.” However, Boswell, to Lord Auchinleck’s satisfaction, settled down to study his Erskine’s *Institutes and the Corpus Juris Civilis*; passed for the Bar - that was in 1766 - and within a year made respectable fees by glib speeches before their lordships - for writers were shrewd enough to employ an advocate who was the friend of every judge and whose father sat upon the bench. He found literary company at the tables of Hume and Robertson, of Kames and Monboddo; he frequented the Select Society, and jovial company which was not select at the Soaping Club. Everybody laughed at “Paoli Boswell,” as he delighted to be called, and deemed him an incorrigible ass - were they wrong? Even his father called him by that ignoble term, on which he rejoined, “No, sir, not an ass; only a colt, the foal of an ass.” To be button-holed by him in Parliament Close; to listen to his pompous speeches about all he had seen and done and said; to be asked, “Have you seen my new prologue?” “Have you read my impromptu on Lord Alesmore?” was a daily experience. His face was gaining already its hues of red, his figure showed a tendency to paunchiness,

JAMES BOSWELL

his confidential voice was becoming more consequential, as he revealed profound secrets to a friend's ear which would be poured into a dozen ears before an hour was over. Yet there was much that was likeable about the man; he was a "comical dog, to be sure." "Boswell is a man who I believe never left a house without leaving a wish for his return," said Johnson. "He is very good-humoured, very agreeable, and very mad," said David Hume. [Burton's *Life of Hume*, ii. 307.] "It is no wonder Mr. Boswell was universally well received," records old, gossipy John Taylor [Taylor's *Records of my Life*, i. 216.]; "he was full of anecdotes, well acquainted with the most distinguished characters, good-humoured, and ready at repartee. There was a jovial bluntness in his manner which threw off all restraint with strangers and immediately kindled social familiarity."

Unfortunately, the wholesome influence of his "revered friend" Johnson could not subdue the exuberance of Bozzy's spirits. When the news of the decision of the House of Lords on the famous Douglas case arrived in Edinburgh the excitement was wild. Boswell, who had been one of the junior counsel in the House of Lords, headed the mob which broke the windows of the judges whose verdict was reversed, and his father, with tears in his eyes, besought the Lord President to lock up his incorrigible son in the Tolbooth Prison. [Ramsay's *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 170. While the case was proceeding in the House of Lords in 1767, *Dorando, A Spanish Tale*, giving the Douglas story thinly disguised, was published, for which the publisher was summoned before the Court of Session. Boswell the author escaped under his anonymity.]

In 1768 appeared *An Account of Corsica, by James Boswell, Esq.*, and the result was immediate success. Everybody read it; even the fastidious Horace Walpole praised this book "by a strange fellow, who has a rage for knowing everybody that was ever talked of," The historical part is dull, but the tour in which Paoli is Boswellised is certainly entertaining. In the fulness of notoriety the author bustled up to town, where "my book has an amazing popularity," to receive congratulations, and he took care to have his arrival heralded by paragraphs in the *Public Advertiser*. "28th February: James Boswell, Esq., is expected in town." "24th March: James Boswell, Esq., yesterday arrived from Scotland at his lodgings at Half Moon Street, Piccadilly." Puffed up like a pouter pigeon, he went from house to house prating of his doings and his tour. "I am really a great man now," he wrote to his friend Temple. "I have David Hume in the forenoon, and Mr. Johnson in the afternoon. I give admirable dinners and good claret, and the moment I go abroad again I set up my chariot." [Letters to Temple, p. 151.] It is to Mr. Temple, an old class-mate at College, now an English clergyman, who took life and its duties very easily, that Bozzy reveals himself in the packet of letters rescued from a shop in

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Boulogne, where they were being used to wrap up parcels of butter. All that a man with any self-respect would keep from mortal ear he babbles forth to his friend, - his maudlin sentiments, his paternal squabbles, his moral “aberrations,” his amours, his “irregularities” and his lachrymose penitence. After each lapse from virtue or sobriety he is sure to make devout promises of amendment. Just as after each carouse he had his headaches, so after each irregularity he has his conscientious qualms, which are only Mr. Boswell’s moral headaches that come in the morning and vanish at noon. If he gets drunk he pours out remorse in hiccoughing piety, and maunders out, “This is not worthy of Mr. Johnson.” He had taken a resolution under “a solemn yew-tree” [*Letters*, p. 210.] to keep to his one bottle of hock; but alas, he has to own that he got wild - “not drunk, but intoxicated” - and very ill next day; and with grave reprehension on his native land, he remarks, “The drunken manners of this country are very bad.” We know well that some heroic resolve is certain to be followed by some excess in liquor, and each bibulous excess, by another heroic resolve. One day he has a jovial mood, and he confesses he is really growing a “drunkard”; another day he has an ultra-bilious mood, and he gains sweet, but irrelevant consolation in the words, “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found.” He protests that he “must not behave in a manner unworthy of Paoli’s friend”; whereupon “Paoli’s friend” lapses miserably. He reminds one of a man who, in his cups, cannot keep his balance, but tries to walk with preternatural erectness, deliberation, and solemnity, and then falls prone in the gutter, protesting with a dignity, slightly impaired by incoherence, that his habits are perfectly sober. He had, too, his fits of melancholy, frequent depression of spirits which should, but somehow do not, move us to sympathy; but there was considerable satisfaction to their victim in thinking that these moods were fresh points of likeness to the sage of Bolt Court.

Most characteristic of vainglorious Boswell was his appearance at the Shakespeare Jubilee at Stratford-on-Avon, that ridiculous celebration set up by Garrick, who was master of the revels. He supplied a description of himself in the *London Magazine* thus: “One of the most remarkable masks was James Boswell, Esq., in the dress of a Corsican chief. He entered the amphitheatre about twelve o’clock. He wore a short, coloured coat of coarse cloth, scarlet waistcoat and breeches, and black spatter-dashes; his cap was of black cloth, on the front of it was embroidered in gilt letters *Viva la Liberta!* on the one side of it was a blue feather and cockade, so that it had an elegant, as well as war-like appearance. He had also a cartridge pouch, in which was stuck a stiletto, and on the left side a pistol was

JAMES BOSWELL

hung upon the belt of his cartridge pouch. He had a fusil slung across his shoulders; wore no powder on his hair, but had it plaited at full length, with a knot of blue ribbon at the end of it. He had, by way of staff, a very curious vine, all of one piece, emblematical of the Sweet Bard of Avon. So soon as he entered the room he drew universal attention.” And so on the egregious person proceeds, telling whom he accosted, whom he danced with, how he demeaned himself - his own verses are puffed, and his portrait in costume is inserted. Alas! the day and its mummeries were spoilt, for it poured cats and dogs - costumes were soaked, the company was drenched, the river rose in flood, and the grounds were laid in water. It was disappointing; but it had its compensations. “It was like an artichoke,” philosophised Mr. Boswell, “we have a few mouthfuls, but also swallow the leaves and the hair, which are difficult of digestion. After all I was highly delighted with my artichoke.” The strange creature never knew when he was making a fool of himself.

Thus for a while he went on attending taverns, waiting on Dr. Johnson, hunting out every one with a scrap of celebrity, enjoying the delicacies of the table and the indelicacies of the clubs. Everybody of note and letters he entertained in more senses than one. Reynolds, Lord Nugent, Churchill, John Wilkes met at his board, and he felt himself the equal of any. “John Wilkes and I sat together, each glass of wine produced a flash of wit like gunpowder thrown into the fire - puff - puff,” he records in his *Commonplace Book*, where the specimens complacently treasured of his own wit are often fatuous. [*Boswelliana*, p. 322.]

Never was there a more inflammable being, or one distracted by more fluctuating sentiments. Five damsels at once won his attentions. They were truly cosmopolitan - Dutch, Irish, English, and Scottish - and to these he paid his addresses, after having carefully appraised their fortunes, and toasted them with amorous inebriety at the Soaping Club. Among those who attracted this erratic amorist in later years was the handsome and notorious Mrs. Rudd, whom he visited in prison, and who visited him out of it, [*Fitzgerald's Life of Boswell*, i. 221.] after her accomplices, the brothers Perreau, had been hanged for forgery, - an operation which Boswell, who dearly loved a hanging, did not fail to witness and greatly enjoy. Observe the fine tact and delicacy of the suitor in his directions to the Rev. Mr. Temple, how to puff his merits to the adorable Miss Blair: [*Letters*, p. 198.] “Praise me for my good qualities, you know them, but talk also how odd, how impetuous, how much accustomed to women of intrigue. Ask gravely, ‘Don’t you imagine there is something of madness in that family?’ Talk of my travels - Voltaire, Rousseau.”

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

Surely there was at least one case of “madness” in “that family.” No wonder his irascible parent was indignant at such an amazing son, his idleness and his folly, his debts and his vagaries. It was bad enough for the dour Presbyterian and Whig to have a son a Jacobite and an Episcopalian, without any other trials. As his lordship told Dr. Johnson, when he sat at his table, that Cromwell had “garred kings ken they had a lith (a joint) in their necks,” so he did not cease to warn Jamie that there was a “lith” in the settlement of his property, which might be broken if he did not mend his ways, for it was more than flesh and blood could stand, especially from his own flesh. At last Boswell’s attentions, if not his heart, were fixed, and in 1769 he married his cousin, Miss Montgomery. The same day there took place another wedding, which was duly recorded in the *Scots Magazine*: “25th November: at Edinburgh, Alexander Boswell, Esq., of Auchinleck, one of the Lords of Session, to Miss Betty Boswell, second daughter of John Boswell of Balmuto, deceased.” There was a fine sardonic and malicious humour in this judge of sixty years of age. Now his son was forced for a while to settle down to practise at the bar, though with doubtful success, and to join in the simple customs of the town. Very little work did he do, and he seems to have been utterly dependent on the untender mercies of his father, whose estimable wife felt little love for her stepson. He mingled the levities of the city with sedate attendance at Dr. Black’s lectures on chemistry - - a study “which Dr. Johnson recommends.” A flat in James’ Court became the residence of Boswell as a married man. One entered the home by an entry on the level of the High Street, and found oneself on the fourth story of a house built on the slope of the hill looking over the tops of elm-trees across to the Fife coast. There in 1771 he was proud to entertain General Paoli, and show him all the sights and all the *literati* in the town.

We come now to the crowning glory of Bozzy’s career. On various visits to London - ostensibly on law business - he had mixed with all the notabilities of the day: he had been admitted to the Literary Club by the overpowering influence of Dr. Johnson, though he was not received with effusion. “A bore,” said Topham Beauclerc; “a burr,” grumbled Oliver Goldsmith; “a buffoon,” sneered Andrew Murphy. But once he entered the charmed circle he was found to be a most “clubbable man,” bringing unfailing good humour to the company. During that London visit he had successfully urged his friend and mentor to make a tour in Scotland, and travel as far as the Hebrides, a wild region unknown to English travellers, and whose attractions might seem slight to a Londoner whose ideals of scenery were houses in Fleet Street, and the “full tide of humanity” at Charing

JAMES BOSWELL

Cross.

It was in February 1773 that Dr. Johnson arrived at Boyd's White Horse Inn in the Canongate, and there the faithful Boswell found the illustrious stranger in a rage at the Scots waiter for lifting the lump of sugar with dirty fingers to sweeten his lemonade, which the Doctor flung out of the window. [Boswell's *Johnson*, (edit. Hill), v. 22.] He was conducted to Mr. Boswell's flat, with its spacious rooms, where he stayed, to Mrs. Boswell's hardly-concealed annoyance, which she conveyed to her lady friends by her emphatic verdict that "he was a great brute!" She could not endure his splutterings, his contortions, his irregular hours, his habit of turning lighted candles with the wicks downwards to make them burn the brighter, making her best carpets patchworks of grease and wax. That the sage was not a social success is very evident from information which is not furnished by Mr. Boswell. He dictated to his entertainers, bullied their guests, and laid down the law on every possible thing. Ladies were timid, professors were silent in his overpowering presence, and all were deferential, almost obsequious, to escape his tongue. It was noted that Mr. Crosbie, the lawyer, alone "stood up" to him; while the literary and legal magnates - Robertson, Blair, Kames, and Monboddo - were meek before him. David Hume had only quitted that James' Court the year before for St. Andrew Square, having lived in the very stair in which the Boswells dwelt, else the portly bodies of the moralist and the philosopher might have come in collision in the turnpike staircase. [Not the same flat, as was supposed by J. H. Burton, *Letters of David Hume* (edited by Hill), p. 119, note.] Scotsmen of fashion and men of letters thought little of his English breeding; he disgusted hosts by his manner, and hostesses by his manners. What could they say, Whigs as they were, as the Tory vociferated at the table of a Lord of Session: "Sir, George the First was a robber, George the Second was a brute, George the Third is an idiot!" [*Jacobite Lairds of Gask*, p. 395.] Yet how deferential he was at the evening party at James' Court to the old Duchess of Douglas, stupid and illiterate, whom Johnson describes as "talking broad Scots with a paralytic voice, scarce understood by her own countrymen." There he was, devoting his uncouth attention to her vulgar old Grace, whose unintelligible stupidity Boswell translated for the ear of his guest. [Topham's *Letters from Edinburgh*, p. 138; Wilson's *Memorials of Old Edinburgh*, i. 257.]

All this was true; but what triumph was it for Bozzy to introduce his distinguished companion to the great persons in Edinburgh? to point out to his purblind vision the sights of the capital; to conduct him arm-in-arm to the Parliament Close, and pose before his brother advocates as the bosom friend of a very great man; although he was taken aback by Henry Erskine, with gross

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

frivolity, slipping a shilling into his hand, saying it was payment “for a sight of his bear.” Right glad was Mrs. Boswell when she saw the broad back of the learned rambler turned, as he set forth on his journey with her spouse, in his huge brown coat with vast capacious pockets able to contain two volumes folio, in his huge boots, and bearing his big English oak stick. The poor lady, who had no little cleverness and some sense of dignity, had been disgusted at her husband grovelling before his master. She protested that she “had often seen a bear led by a man, but never till now had she seen a man led by a bear” [*Boswelliana*. He kept notes of her smart sayings, headed *Uxoriana*.] - which sentence vexed him with its sneer, but pleased his sense of humour.

The travels in the North, are they not chronicled for all time in Johnson’s *Journey to the Western Islands*, and in his friend’s infinitely more lively *Tour to the Hebrides*, with those dramatic touches, so inimitable, which make it and the Biography deathless? As the strange pair perambulated the north of Scotland, in the south Lord Auchinleck was grumbling over his son’s new vagary. [Croker’s *Correspondence*, ii. 30.] “Jamie has gaen clean gyte. What do you think, man? He’s dune wi’ Paoli - he’s aff wi’ the land-loupin’ scoondrel o’ a Corsican. Whae’s tail do ye think he has preened himsel’ tae noo? A dominie man! - an auld dominie, wha keepit a schule and caa’ed it an Acaademy!” After being eighty-three days in the North Bozzy brought his friend to Auchinleck, the paternal home in Ayrshire, surrounded by its fine woods, of which the laird was so proud, that he would get up at five o’clock in the morning to prune them. Here, at least, the lexicographer could not say there was not a tree to be seen. The visit was peaceful but not successful. The Scots Whig and Presbyterian judge had nothing in common with the English Tory and High Churchman. The laird, proud of his long pedigree, was not impressed by a dictionary-maker, the son of a poor country bookseller. They touched on politics and theology and churches, but there was no feud, for the visitor was evidently on his best behaviour. They were civil and respectful to each other, and parted with no desire ever to meet again. Auchinleck freely told his friends in Edinburgh his impression of his late guest: “He is only a dominie, and the worst mannered dominie I ever met.” [Ramsay’s *Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 176.] “My father,” bleated forth his son to his confidant, Temple, “harps upon my going over Scotland with a brute - think how shockingly erroneous!” [*Letters to Temple*, p. 207.] Worse than that, there were unpleasant menaces, and the words, “James, my estate is not entailed,” would make him uneasy, and cause him to think he had better attend more to the bar in the Court of Session and a little less to the bar in the taverns. As Dr.

JAMES BOSWELL

Johnson said the father and son incessantly “divaricated,” and Bozzy owned he felt under the parental treatment “like a timid boy.”

Visits to London, attendances on his illustrious friend, were the triumphs of his life. Rather than join in the merriest company, where he could be glorious, or move in high society as one so proud of his ancient lineage might well have done, he would wait on Dr. Johnson in all the dirt and shabbiness of the lodgings in Bolt Court. Let this be put down fairly and fully to Boswell’s credit. He left club and theatre and rout for the dingy abode with its strange menagerie of dependants on the benevolent sage, who squabbled and backbit each other from morning till night. Blind, querulous Mrs. Williams; Mrs. Desmoulins, who cooked atrocious fare, and her daughter; Polly Carmichael - “a stupid slut” his host called her; and old Richard Levett, the apothecary, whose manners were “brutal,” though his heart was excellent, who earned fees from squalid patients in the form of meat, clothing, and drink, and to whom his protector would chuck bits of roll at breakfast to munch. Was there ever such a home? “Williams hates every body,” groaned the doctor to Mrs. Thrale. “Levett hates Desmoulins and does not love Williams. Desmoulins hates them both, and Polly loves none of them.” [D’Arblay’s *Diary*; Johnson’s *Letters* (edited Birkbeck Hill); ii. p. 77.]

Much as the life in London bulks in Boswell’s career, it after all amounted to two years altogether, and the time of direct intercourse with his friend, Croker calculated, was only 267 days in all. But then, what attentive days they were! for he was the faithful companion everywhere. Bozzy would take his seat beside his friend, or place his chair immediately behind him, his mouth open, his eyes goggling with eagerness, his ear bent down close in anxiety not to miss one syllable of the Oracle’s utterances [*Memoirs of Dr. Burney*, ii. 190.] - “watching,” as he tells us, “every dawning communication of that illuminated mind.” It did not disconcert him when Johnson would call out, “Bozzy!” and finding him posed at his shoulder, vociferated, “What do you there, sir? go to the table.” He docilely withdrew. The notebooks were ready in his pocket to report every word, and Mrs. Thrale had some reason to complain of his “vastly spoiling conversation”; for, in the far end of Streatham drawing-room, there was the fussy, inquisitive recorder, pencil in hand. Then the endless questions he would put might well rouse the sage into passion. “Sir, I will not be put to the question. Don’t you consider, sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with what? and why? what is this? why is that? why is a cow’s tail long? why is a fox’s tail bushy?” One day Johnson came to Mrs. Thrale in high dudgeon. [*Autobiography of Mrs. Piozzi*, ii. 125.] “I have been so put to

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

the question by Bozzy this morning that I am panting for breath. What sort of questions? Why, one question was: Pray, sir, can you tell me why an apple is round and a pear is pointed? Would not such talk make a man hang himself? “The insatiable note-taker, however, bore very patiently every taunt and snub. He was content to be the butt so long as he might record the bits. Some men must pocket affronts to conceal them. Boswell pocketed - and pocket-booked them - to publish them. Only did his self-respect feel wounded when he was “tossed” in company, and then the patient worm would gently turn. Under a brutal indignity Murphy had seen him leave the room in tears; but he was very, very placable, as we find in this little dialogue. BOSWELL: “I said to-day to Sir Joshua when he observed that you *tossed* me sometimes, ‘I don’t care how often or how high he tosses me when only friends are present, for then I fall upon soft ground; but I do not like falling on stones, which is the case when enemies are present.’ I think this a pretty good image, sir.” JOHNSON: “Sir, it is one of the happiest I ever heard.” Whereupon Bozzy was happy once more. No rebuff could weaken his affection; no insult could lessen his esteem for his hero, whom he toadied, till the victim cried out: “Sir, you have but two topics - yourself and me: I am sick of both.”

That this garrulous, vain, wine-bibbing tattler should ally himself with the great moralist, may be explained by his love of notoriety and of notables; but that the austere, intolerant veteran of letters should like - indeed love - such a companion, is a curious problem. Yet, moralist though he was, he liked, as he said, to “frisk it” now and then, - he loved the Honourable Tom Hervey, the rake, and Topham Beauclerc, whose morals were far to seek. Boswell, though not learned, and needing his mentor’s advice to “read more and drink less,” knew something of letters, knew much of the world, was clever, entertaining, good-natured, and loyal. In 1784 Dr. Johnson died while Boswell was in Scotland. The great man’s death had its consolation. Mr. Boswell could now write his life. For years note-books had been filling for this set purpose; for years he had been collecting and collating, questioning friends, pestering strangers with unshubbable pertinacity about the “great Sam,” as he jocularly and familiarly called him. [D’Arblay’s *Diary*, v. 166.] In 1786 the inimitable *Tour to the Hebrides* was published - a foretaste of the great Biography, which came upon the world on 16th May 1791, the anniversary of the first interview in Tom Davies’s back shop. For its supreme qualities the world had not been prepared by the many absurd pamphlets he had issued on politics, law, trade, and slavery, full of rhodomontade and egotism run wild. In these pages the “great man” lives as he lived in the flesh, with all his strange ways and uncouth

JAMES BOSWELL

habits, his contortions and scrofula, his appetite for fish sauce and veal pies with plums, his lurching gait as he walked, his treasuring of orange peel, his superstition and hypochondria, his brow-beating and intolerance, and withal his kindness, his honesty, his sterling virtues. Every detail of his life is there, giving marvellous vividness to the portrait, so that we know him and his friends better than we know our neighbours next door. Good Mrs. Hannah More begged the biographer to “mitigate some of his asperities,” but he replied bluntly, “he would not cut off his claws to make a tiger a cat for anybody.” Not a look, a gesture, an accent, seems missed by Boswell, for he was full of his subject: he was a Johnson-intoxicated man. He cared not, in his effort to make a complete biography (such as he avowed had never been written before) if he offended the living in his picture of the dead. Many had indeed cause to complain of unflattering personalities - some complained because they were mentioned unkindly; others complained because, unkindly, they were not mentioned at all. He does not even spare himself, for if he meets with an insult from his “revered friend,” he does not waste it; he serves it up as table talk, although he may disguise it as being addressed “to a gentleman in the company.” Unconsciously he reveals himself at every turn - his toadyism, his buffoonery, his vanity, his fear of the spirits he believed in, his love of the spirits he imbibed. He tells unabashed of his maudlin piety, his intoxication at Miss Monckton’s, his lowing like a cow in the theatre to the delight of the footmen. No wonder his sons could not bear to hear mentioned that book about which the whole world was talking. The weaknesses of the man make the display of his literary qualities all the more surprising - the exquisite dramatic touches, the fine comedy of the “conversation pieces,” the skill with which the characteristics of each person is hit off, the inevitable seizing of the salient points in every speech, the keen observation, the fine eye for effect, which have never been approached by any other biographer. Edmund Burke was right when he said Johnson was greater in Boswell’s pages than in any of his own. Many essayed the great moralist’s life, from Sir John Hawkins upwards or downwards, seeking to make a living out of the dead. “How many maggots have crawled out of that great body!” [*Memoirs of Hannah More.*] Burke exclaimed to Hannah More; but all have vanished, as is the way of maggots, and the great work, by a small man, survives. Seven years were spent on this *magnum opus*, and no part of the author’s life was spent to such excellent purpose. The rest of his career may be shortly summed up, for it was not glorious. His father had died, old, bodily and mentally enfeebled, in 1782, and Boswell reigned in his stead at Auchinleck. He lived, however, much in London, where he took a house,

SCOTTISH MEN OF LETTERS

and joined the English bar, believing that there a wider field could be found for his distinguished forensic talents. He soon showed that he knew as little of jurisprudence, as he did of prudence; and his learning and sobriety must have been very much on a par, if we believe Lord Eldon's story. Jemmy Boswell being found drunk on the pavement when on circuit in a country town, the barristers sent him next day a guinea fee and a brief to move for a writ of *Quare adhasit pavimento*. Boswell having in vain sought light upon the obscure legal point moved for a writ, to the delight of his brothers and the amazement of the judge, who exclaimed: "I have never heard of such a writ - what can it be that adheres to the pavement?" At last a barrister explained that it was Boswell himself who was found adhering to the pavement, and was carried to bed, and had been dreaming about it ever since. [*Life of Eldon*, by Twiss, i. 130.]

It was in 1790 that Francis Jeffrey, then a boy, had the privilege of assisting to carry the body of the distinguished biographer [*Cockburn's Life of Jeffrey*, i. 34.] to bed in a state of woeful intoxication, and next morning he had the honour of being patted on the head by the unabashed inebriate, who patronisingly told him he was a "promising lad," and "that if you go on as you've begun, you may live to be a Bozzy yet." This was at a time when he was promising his friends Courtenay, Malone, and Temple to preserve sobriety with the utmost fervency, and drinking with reckless frequency. Some years before, as the aged Lord Kames was getting into his sedan-chair, Boswell stopped to speak to him. On parting, his Lordship said, "Boswell, I hope to see your good father one of those days. Have you any message for him? Shall I tell him how you are going on?" [*Ramsay's Scotland and Scotsmen*, i. 248.] It is to be hoped, for the comfort of poor Auchinleck, who had been so much worried by his son in this world, that Kames held his "ill tongue" on the subject when he met him in the other.

Meanwhile his wife, a woman of sense and some wit, had much to endure - her society neglected for "good company," where he got tipsy, with the usual sequels of fits of depression and tearful sentiment. He reminds us of Sir Richard Steele with his bibulous indulgence, and protestations of affection in notelets to his much-suffering spouse: "I am, dear Prue, a little in drink, but all the time your faithful husband, Richard Steele." All his characteristics remained unchanged; his alternate hypochondria and joviality; his moods of piety and his lapses from it; his superstitions; his love of excitement - especially for a hanging, in which he was as keen a connoisseur as George Selwyn himself. He was ready to kneel down and join in the chaplain's prayers in the prison cells with the convict in profoundest

JAMES BOSWELL

devotion, and to see him turned off at Tyburn with the greatest gusto, - to witness fifteen men hanged at once filled him with the keenest pleasure and the finest moral reflections. Vain as poor Goldsmith, whose pride in his plum-coloured coat from Filbey's he laughed at, he would rush in his Court dress from a levee at St. James's to dazzle compositors at the printing-offices with his magnificence. Few figures were better known in London artistic and literary society than his - paunchy and puffy, with red face, long, cocked nose, protuberant mouth and chin, with mock solemnity of manner and voice, with slow gait and slovenly dress - the clothes being loose, the wig untidy, the gestures restless so as to resemble his great master, [D'Arblay's *Memoirs of Dr. Burney*, ii. 190-7; D'Arblay's *Diary*, v. 306.] of whom he incessantly spoke, and whose big manner and oddities he mimicked with infinite drollery, making listeners convulse with laughter at the exquisite, but irreverent copy of his "revered friend."

In his later years there was the same lack of moral ballast and self-respect; the same solemn buffoonery. One sees him in Guildhall [Taylor's *Records*, i. 89.] when William Pitt is entertained by the Worshipful Company of Grocers, standing up to sing a buffoon song, preluded by a rigmarole address, till the party is convulsed with merriment, and the austere face of the statesman relaxes into an unwonted smile at the grotesquely melancholy performance; and as the vocalist, delighted at his brilliant success, retires with his friend from the Hall, he makes the streets resound with shouting again the idiotic song of the evening. He attended the English Bar, where he got no practice; wrote pamphlets which made his friends laugh and his family grave; flattered patrons from whom he gained no posts; stood for an Ayrshire membership of Parliament, but won no seat; paid obsequious court to that social tyrant and political bully, Sir James Lowther, from whom he got a Recordship of Carlisle, and endless insults, submitting to indignities which his obtuseness never perceived.

When Mrs. Boswell was dying at Auchinleck her husband delayed in London, entertaining and carousing, and arrived to find that his "valuable wife" was dead. Thereupon, of course, followed uxorious remorse. Not many months passed by, however, before he was seeking another wife and a fortune; writing to his friend Temple, "You must know I have had several matrimonial schemes of late." [Letters, p. 342.] So the days went by, babbling and fuddling, till the end came in 1795, and, at the age of fifty-five, this erratic, foolish, good-natured, clever creature died - a man whom no one could respect, and whom few could help liking.