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Reviews

Frederick A. Pottle. *James Boswell: The Earlier Years 1740-1769*. New York. McGraw-Hill Book Company. 1966. xxiv + 606 pp. \$12.50.

Intense, even obsessive, observer of the "state of [his] own mind," and possessor of a strange feeling, as if [he] wished nothing to be secret that concerned [himself]," Boswell bequeathed an immense task to his biographer: to cope with the history of that mind, the moments of "heightened consciousness," faithfully recorded in voluminous journals and extensive correspondence, and somehow join this enterprise in a connected and credible way to the public life of the gentleman, lawyer, and author. Professor Frederick A. Pottle, veteran of more than forty years of Boswellian studies, brings off this feat in a book thick and square enough, but surely never to be damned. Appropriately, the boards are green and gold: Paoli's colours at the first momentous meeting with Boswell; Wilkes' colours on the hustings of 1768; and Boswell's, when he was taken for Wilkes by a Middlesex voter; when he interviewed Rousseau; when he was painted in Rome; and when he wooed his "Princess," Miss Catherine Blair of Adamton.

In the introduction to the biography, three main themes or "structural principles" are announced. The first is that of Family, the biographer never forgetting that Boswell is a member of a Scots landed family, glorying in, but on occasion suffering painfully from, pride of blood and property. Also to be reckoned with, in connexion with Family, is the great psycho-drama of Boswell's career, the conflict of wills with his father, Lord Auchinleck, whose coldness and harshness deprived him of a place in his son's heart, thus opening the way for Samuel Johnson. The relationship between Boswell and Johnson is judiciously kept in this perspective, though more could have been done, perhaps, to show that there were other candidates for the role of father-surrogate, notably Lord Kames and David Hume, who were disqualified, however, by being Scotsmen and sceptics. The second theme is that of Law. Professor Pottle is at pains to demonstrate that Boswell was "very throng" with legal

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business, at least in 1766-69, capable of summoning his law clerk at 6 a.m. and dictating forty folio pages in one day. His civil practice earned good fees, and his criminal, notoriety. The third theme is that of Authorship, the justification in the Professor's view for writing the book: "I have tried not to forget that my prime responsibility as a biographer of Boswell was to define and assess his literary genius."

The literary genius is presented as essentially one for journalizing, born of a zest for life which Boswell did not consider complete until he had expressed it in words: "I should live no more than I can record, as one should not have more corn than one can get in." The journalist's "almost pedantic passion for circumstantial accuracy" is noted, but it is argued that Boswell's method does not consist in successful competition with Pepys, say, as a recorder of "historical detail." Rather Boswell is to be compared with Rousseau, as a dissector of his own motives, and one who achieves a superior degree of detachment to that found in the French writer. Of the highest interest, too, is Boswell's style, a reflection of the intellectual attitude of "invincible mediocrity," which allows Boswell to select his details and interpret them at the level of common human experience. It is in this respect that Boswell is declared to have made his greatest appeal to modern readers, whose ears are attuned to the style of writers such as Maugham and Hemingway.

As to the form of the journal, it is suggested that this is intrinsically dramatic: characterization and discourse so cast in it that scenes are immediately rendered. Inquiring into possible models for the early "Harvest Jaunt" of 1762, the forerunner of the "London Journal" of 1762-63, Professor Pottle holds that the likeliest candidates are printed plays and the novels of Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett. Richardson, indeed, is singled out as the writer who "first demonstrated the values of the scrupulous short-term dramatic stance which furnishes the prime characteristics of Boswell's journalizing." Be this as it may, more allowance should be made for the dazzling effect on Boswell of Sterne's techniques of fiction. A point is made about the "violent rash of Shandyism which disfigured [Boswell's] writings for many years," but this is too partisan a position to take; the art displayed in *Tristram Shandy*, particularly in controlling direct and indirect discourse, and the use of significant aspects of appearance and gesture to reveal humour and human individuality, were by no means lost on Boswell.

To unfold his three themes, Professor Pottle seems to adopt for his book a classical mode, its twenty-four chapters perhaps represent-

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ing Boswell's *Odyssey*, ending with a return home, in the sense of a marriage in Ayrshire to a cousin and neighbour. The opening chapter springs on the reader a hitherto unknown "Sketch of the Early Life of James Boswell, Written by Himself for Jean Jacques Rousseau, 5 December 1764." The leading motifs in the "Sketch" are the "effects of a bad education" and casuistry over sexual passion, nicely calculated by Boswell to intrigue Rousseau whom he hoped would become his mentor, and artfully exploited by the biographer as he carries his reader through ten chapters of Boswell's adventures and wanderings until the confession, in chapter eleven, of his anxieties and depravities to Rousseau (Boswell-Odysseus describing his descent into Hades for Rousseau-Alcinöös). The bad education, according to Boswell, principally resided in the dogmatic Calvinism he encountered in his early days, together with the attentions of a weak but pious mother, and the severities of a father who could not spare him enough time, but expected Boswell to follow in his footsteps as a lawyer. The seeds of Boswell's later characteristics are traced to some of his earliest experiences; for example, a reason for his life-long preoccupation with judicial hanging is found in the fact that as a young boy he attended Mundell's academy, situated at the West Bow of Edinburgh, in searing proximity to the scaffold. The conflict with Lord Auchinleck is shown to intensify as Boswell developed ideas of his own, about religion—for a brief interval he became a Roman Catholic convert; about diversions—in Edinburgh, while a student, he first gave rein to his passion for the theatre and for the company of actors and actresses; and about residence in London and a commission in the Horse Guards. So exasperated was Lord Auchinleck by this "strange conduct," that on 30 May 1763, he admitted he had considered disinheriting Boswell, "from the principle that it is better to snuff a candle out than leave it to stink in a socket."

As for Boswell's sexual career, he had entered into this on the rebound from Catholicism in 1760, under the tutelage of Lord Eglinton in London. Two years later, he had begun a dangerous affair with Jean Heron, the married daughter of his patron, Lord Kames. Taking care to conceal this lady's name from Rousseau, but not proof against the relentless deductions of Professor Pottle, Boswell asked Rousseau about the ethics of his relationship with Mrs. Heron and how to cope with the ardent desires which drove him into Mrs. Heron's arms and those of actresses and street-walkers. His self-chosen mentor advised giving up Mrs. Heron and strengthening the spiritual side of his nature. Before this point is reached in the narrative, we

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are given an account of Boswell's studies at Edinburgh and at Glasgow, where he was impressed by Adam Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres; the second visit to London is described, in the course of which Samuel Johnson was encountered in Davies's bookshop; and we read of Boswell's period in Holland, where his rigidly-organized life of study plunged him into hypochondria, so much so that he awoke one morning, as he said, "as dreary as a dromedary." Then commences his Grand Tour, when he accompanied the Earl Marischal to Germany.

Boswell's motives of self-education during his years on the Continent are well brought out in Geoffrey Scott's roguish synopsis of the attitudes struck in the journal: "pedantic in Holland, princely in Germany, philosophic in Switzerland, amorous in Italy." Apart from the conversations with Rousseau in December 1764, the other notable philosophic exchanges, also in that month, were with Voltaire. Boswell had one rather unsatisfactory interview, terminated because he had to be back in Geneva before the city gates were closed at night-fall, so he made up his mind to spend a night at Ferney. In consequence, he wrote a letter in his best form, offering, as a hardy Scot, to sleep in the coldest garret, or across two chairs in the maid's bedchamber. Obviously amused, Voltaire sent for Boswell and agreed to speak in English: "At last we came to religion. Then did he rage. The company went to supper. M. de Voltaire and I remained in the drawing room with a great Bible before us; and if ever two mortal men disputed with vehemence, we did. Yes, upon that occasion he was one individual and I another. For a certain portion of time there was a fine opposition between Voltaire and Boswell." The account of the stay with Voltaire ends with the longest passage of self-analysis that the journalist had written so far. Boswell's complacent praise for himself is as follows: "I can tune myself so to the tone of any bearable man I am with that he is as much at freedom as with another self, and, till I am gone, cannot imagine me a stranger." The young man has found a role: henceforth, he is the Great Chameleon of Literature.

In the second half of his biography, Professor Pottle brings in new motifs, always relating them scrupulously to the "structural principles" of Family, Law, and Authorship. We read of Boswell's visit to Corsica and the elaboration of the Plutarchan portrait of General Paoli. This is ingeniously contrasted with the more detailed strokes for what is called the Flemish portrait of Johnson. From the Corsican adventures, with their glow of Rousseauistic enthusiasm for the nobly

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primitive—Boswell throwing stones up into chestnut trees to collect sustenance in the manner of the *prisca gens mortalium*, are sprung the *Account of Corsica* and the *Journal of a Tour*, published as one work in 1768, which brought Boswell international fame and the longed-for sense of being truly alive: "it was wonderful how much Corsica has done for me, how far I had got in the world by having been there. I had got upon a rock in Corsica and jumped into the middle of life."

While Boswell's regard for Paoli and Johnson seems to have increased rather than diminished the longer he knew them, the spell cast over him by Rousseau did not last, perhaps as a result of revelations he heard in Geneva. These suggested that the philosopher who had preached austerities to him was a weak and erring man, capable of giving away to a Foundling Hospital the five children borne to him by his mistress, Thérèse Le Vasseur. Returning to England from Paris in 1766, Boswell undertook to convey Thérèse to Rousseau, then in London under Hume's aegis. Twice previously, Professor Pottle has printed Colonel Isham's reconstruction of a passage, deleted in 1927 from the journal, in which Thérèse is represented as rebelling against Boswell's clumsiness as a lover and offering to teach him something about the art of love. Now, Professor Pottle rejects this as a piece of "brilliant historical fiction" on Isham's part, the grounds being that a low-class servant woman would not have daunted Boswell, and the reconstructed passage makes no mention of Boswell missing the boat at Calais, which provided the opportunity for an intrigue. This reasoning is somewhat tenuous: one does get the impression that Boswell was crude as a lover—"I began to throw out hints at the opera [to the Countess of San Gillio, who was past fifty]. I sat vis-à-vis to her and pressed her legs with mine, which she took very graciously." Thérèse had been the mistress of Rousseau, described by Boswell as possessing the traits of refinement and tenderness. To Boswell, she must have had the aura of someone associated with a most remarkable man, and this would be a daunting thought. A failure to mention the missed Channel packet is perhaps no great oversight: Boswell may even have failed to notice this in the flush of success with Thérèse and the contretemps that followed. A further thought occurs, that Boswell may have been particularly deficient on this occasion, well knowing that he was injuring someone who had been kind to him.

Back in Scotland in March 1766, Boswell resumed legal studies under his father's guidance, passing his trials in Scots law in July. During his first session after putting on the gown of an advocate,

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November 1766-March 1767, he is represented as reaching his most incandescent state: giving himself up to hours of "Paphian bliss" with a new mistress, who reconciled him again to the Scots accent; working on his Corsica book; scribbling for the newspapers, with the aim of reversing British policy on Corsica; and deeply engaged in his law practice—saving the sheep thief John Reid from the noose, and involving himself devotedly in the Douglas Cause. This action, the most remarkable in all Scottish legal history, arose from an attempt by the House of Hamilton to nullify Archibald Steuart's claim to the estates of the Duke of Douglas, on the grounds that he was not borne of a fifty-year-old mother, Lady Jane Douglas, the sister of the Duke. The plight of Archibald Douglas (he had given up his father's name) invoked all of Boswell's fanaticism as a defender of Family rights, as well as his infinite resourcefulness as a pamphleteer. The story of the Douglas Cause is traced with great skill, the biographer allowing that he has "misrepresented the swirling, incongruous, existential variety of Boswell's consciousness by isolating one narrative pattern." The result is that one knows exactly what was the nature of Boswell's interventions in print: from *Dorando*, an allegorized *ex parte* statement, meant to bias the judges and all concerned against the Hamiltons; through amusing fabrications for the newspapers about shorthand writers coming from England to report the court proceedings in Edinburgh; and on to *The Essence of the Douglas Cause*, a masterly condensation into eighty pages of the "immense volumes of proofs and arguments," written, as Boswell modestly admitted, "with a labour of which few are capable." In Holland, Boswell had confided in a French theme that he loved the Scots vernacular literature, and the fruits of that love are best represented by a song, never circulated apparently, which is the liveliest of all his Douglasian compositions:

Gif ye a dainty mailing want
And idlesat prefer to working,
Ablins ye'll get it by a plea
That far aff ovr the seas is lurking.

Gang ye your ways to Paris town,
Blow in the lugs o' lown and sorner,
And Ise be caition yese bring hame
An *enlèvement* frae ilka corner.

French proofs! Howt, man, gae haud your tongue!
For to sic proofs nae judge e'er lippens;
Gowpins o' gowd your cause has cost,
And after aw it's no worth tippence.

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Tho' your Memorial's braw and lang,
And tho' your Sequel, like a curple,
Would keep it sicker steeve and tight,
'Twill faw before the men in purple.

Your *procureurs* may by their art
Cast glamour in the een o' dunces,
But conscience, callants! The Fifteen
Are owr auld-farrand for the munsies.

Since ye a worthy lady's name
Wi' muckle foul abuse hae pelted,
By jinks! I'd turn up aw your tails
And hae you aw fu' soundly belted.

Despite Boswell's propaganda campaign on behalf of the House of Douglas, only seven votes went to it from the "men in purple" on the Session Court bench, the Lord President throwing his vote to the Hamilton side to break the tie on 14 July 1767. Eighteen months later, however, on 27 February 1769, the House of Lords reversed this decision on appeal. The biography gives an animated description of the news reaching Edinburgh, Boswell's exuberance attaining the pitch of heading a mob that broke the windows of the Hamilton supporters and those who would not "illuminate" in honour of the Douglas victory, among the latter being Lord Auchinleck.

From his student days in Edinburgh, Boswell had been projecting various schemes of matrimony. The most intriguing object of these was Belle de Zuylen, the beautiful and ironic Zélide, whom he met in Holland in 1763. Her feelings for Boswell revived when she read his book on Corsica, and she began to translate it. Professor Pottle slyly records that she gave up that task and the idea of marrying Boswell, when he refused to change a word in deference to her more accurate taste. His father's choice for Boswell was Miss Catherine Blair, Heiress of Adamton, an estate lying close to Auchinleck. Boswell liked her well enough and wooed her in his bravest clothes of green and gold, but she rejected him for his inconstancy. Exacerbated by this setback, as well as by his son's giddy behaviour in connexion with the Douglas Cause, Lord Auchinleck gave out that he was considering marriage himself—Boswell's mother had died when he was in Paris on the eve of returning home. His outbursts on the score of his father's remarriage are skilfully incorporated into the story of the wooing of Margaret Montgomerie, a somewhat older cousin on his father's side of the Family. Before she was sure of him, she had to wait while Boswell visited London for the fifth time, to get there some of the most memorable conversations which went into

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the *Life of Johnson*. Professor Pottle admits to feeling abashed in the presence of the shade of Margaret Boswell, because of her honourable preference for "reticence and respectability," deadly enemies to biographers. Boswell married her on the same day, 25 November 1769, as Lord Auchinleck married his own first cousin on his father's side. The biography does not end on this defiant and bizarre note, Professor Pottle rightly mentioning an event almost a month later: the young newly-wed Boswells entertaining Lord Auchinleck and his bride in their own house in Edinburgh. We are left to guess at the feelings of the participants, but outwardly the Family is united.

An extraordinary young man, James Boswell, "very good-humoured, very agreeable, and very mad," as David Hume said. Professor Pottle sees him, and we see him, as a result, through a clear glass: "odd, eager, egotistical, boyish, sensual—and attractive." Who could resist a writer who describes his journal as going "charmingly on at present . . . words come skipping to me like lambs upon Moffat Hill"? Who could not, in turn, be repelled by the egotism and sensuality Boswell displays in getting yet another prodigious dose of clap and then infecting a mistress who believes herself to be with child? Yet attraction and repulsion are the products of Boswell's candour and ceaseless self-scrutiny, relayed to us by means of the most assured and fluent of literary styles. Professor Pottle, and all the Yale scholars who have assisted in the recovery of the Boswell *oeuvre*, are to be heartily congratulated on the appearance of a work of biography which increases knowledge of human nature so markedly and will long add to the gaiety of nations.

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G. B. Tennyson. *Sartor called Resartus*. Princeton University Press. Princeton. 1965. viii + 354 pp. \$8.50.

In spite of G. B. Tennyson's prefatory comment that "A new Carlyle may be palingenetically stirring in the ashes of the old," there is little evidence to support such hopefulness. Carlylean scholarship is today in pretty much the same condition as it was in the 1930's