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## A New Letter by James Boswell

Richard C. Cole  
*Davidson College*

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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### A New Letter by James Boswell

In a Dublin newspaper, *The Public Register or Freeman's Journal*, Vol. vi, No. 84, p. 336, for 17-20 June 1769, there is a pseudonymous letter addressed "To the COMMITTEE for conducting the FREE-PRESS." In this paper I want to present the text of the letter and evidence that the author of the letter is James Boswell. The complete, un-edited text follows exactly as it appears in the newspaper:

'Tis quick'ning Liberty that gives us Breath,  
For Absence more than that of Life is Death.  
The Love of Liberty with Life is given,  
And Life itself, the inferior Gift of Heaven.—DRYD.

Gentlemen,

A just Sense of the superior Happiness of living under a free Government, naturally fills the mind with Sentiments of Esteem and Compassion for a brave, distressed People, who nobly struggle to preserve the inestimable Blessings of Liberty, in Opposition to the base Attempts made to deprive them of it, by a powerful and ambitious Enemy, who, being Slaves themselves, would willingly reduce all Mankind to the same State of Servitude. After this, it is almost unnecessary to mention the CORSICANS, as being such a brave, injured People. The noble Stand they have made, in Defence of their Rights and Privileges, against our natural Enemies the French is already sufficiently known, and must procure them universal Reverence and Respect, whilever true Resolution, and a just Regard for Freedom are deemed honourable. Such, Gentlemen, are my Sentiments, and I hope I may be bold to say, that in them I speak the Sentiments of every Irishman. To aid, therefore, a People, who are fighting in Defence of every Thing which can be dear to them, will be an Act of the truest Benevolence. It will be saving a whole Nation from falling into a State to which Death is infinitely preferable. It will tend to make them happy and free, instead of miserable and Slaves, and in short preserve a brave, a generous, a free Nation from the worst of all temporal Evils. When Individuals daily experience the good Effects of our Bounty, surely we will not withhold it, when the Good we may do by conferring it will be still more extensive. When our Charity is extended to those, who have brought themselves to Misery, by their own Wickedness, I cannot think Virtue in Distress to be an Object unworthy of it. But were Motives of Humanity entirely out of the Question, Policy should encline us to assist them. If the French should conquer Corsica, what a considerable Addition of Strength will they acquire by it in the Mediterranean. I think it needless to say any more to induce my Countrymen to contribute towards a scheme, which will be attended with so many good Consequences, but shall rest in Confidence that into

Mr. LaTouche's Bank (which is the place appointed in Mr. Boswell's Advertisement for the Reception of Contributions) large Sums will be paid. I must beg Leave to assure your Readers, that I undertook to write this solely from Motives of Compassion to the Distressed, and that I am, what I am certain both you and they place your chief Glory in,

## A FREE HIBERNIAN

Although there is no positive external evidence of Boswell's authorship of the letter, there is important circumstantial evidence. In a previous article I have described Boswell's reputation in Ireland as the author in 1768 of a widely read book, *An Account of Corsica, The Journal of a Tour to that Island; and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli*, and as an apologist for the Corsicans in their rebellion against the Genoese and then the French. I also discussed Boswell's activities in Dublin during May and June of 1769.<sup>1</sup> Boswell's journal shows that he was in Edinburgh at the time the pseudonymous letter appeared in the *Freeman's Journal*, but he could have sent the letter from Edinburgh just as he sent to the same newspaper his signed appeal for contributions to the Corsican cause. His signed appeal entitled CORSICAN CONTRIBUTION began appearing on 6 June 1769 in the *Freeman's Journal* after he had already left Dublin and ran until 18 July 1769 for a total of thirteen issues; the same notice was carried by George Faulkner in three issues of his *Dublin Journal* during June. In the issue of the *Freeman's Journal* for 17-20 June 1769 Boswell's signed appeal and the pseudonymous letter may be found on the same page. Throughout the period 1766-1769 Boswell was writing for the London and Edinburgh periodicals dozens of anonymous and pseudonymous articles on behalf of the Corsicans, an endeavor which Frederick A. Pottle calls "one of the most elaborate and extended campaigns of puffing and propaganda ever to engage the attention of a man of letters."<sup>2</sup> Boswell's own file of the *London Chronicle*, in which he identified all his anonymous and pseudonymous articles, shows that during 1766-1768 he wrote about the Corsicans under these pseudonyms: "E. D.," "A. E.," "D. D.," "an English soldier in the Corsican service," "a Correspondent," "Humilis," "Philocorsus," "B. M., Oxford," and "a Country Gentleman."<sup>3</sup>

There is considerable internal evidence of Boswell's authorship of the letter. The letter admits of several specific comparisons with Boswell's *An Account of Corsica*. Both writings begin with a general dis-

1. Richard C. Cole, "James Boswell and the Irish Press, 1767-1775," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXXIII (Nov. 1969), 581-598.

2. Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell, The Earlier Years, 1740-1769* (New York, 1966), p. 266.

3. Frederick A. Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell, Esq.* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 237-242.

cussion of liberty and its blessings and then move to the problem of Corsican liberty in particular. The motto at the beginning of the letter, though attributed to Dryden, comes from Dryden only in part; the first couplet is from Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur*, Bk. iv, and the second couplet from Dryden's *Palamon and Arcite*, Bk. ii.<sup>4</sup> Boswell knew both these poets, for he quotes Dryden in *An Account of Corsica*,<sup>5</sup> and he quoted Blackmore to Samuel Johnson on 27 October 1769.<sup>6</sup>

The first paragraph of the introductory chapter of *An Account of Corsica* is similar in thought and vocabulary to the first sentence of the letter:

LIBERTY is so natural, and so dear to mankind, whether as individuals, or as members of society, that it is indispensibly necessary to our happiness. Every thing worthy ariseth from it. Liberty gives health to the mind, and enables us to enjoy the full exercise of our faculties. He who is in chains cannot move either easily or gracefully; nothing elegant or noble can be expected from those, whose spirits are subdued by tyranny, and whose powers are cramped by restraint.

Although the thought is expressed in four sentences in the paragraph from *An Account of Corsica* rather than in one long sentence as in the letter, certain nouns are common to both, such as "happiness," "liberty," "mind," and "mankind." The adjective "noble" in this paragraph is matched by the adverb "nobly" in the first sentence of both the pseudonymous letter and Boswell's signed CORSICAN CONTRIBUTION.

In 1767 when Boswell worked up his Corsican journal of 1765 into publishable form, the enemy of Corsican liberty was Genoa rather than France, but in 1768 Genoa ceded Corsica to France. France, however, had conquered the Corsicans for Genoa in 1739 and had sent troops to Corsica in 1764. In *An Account of Corsica* (p. 138) Boswell gives a translation of Rousseau's statement to M. De Leyre about the French conquest of 1764: "It must be owned that your countrymen, the French, are a very servile nation, wholly sold to tyranny, exceedingly cruel and relentless in persecuting the unhappy. If they knew of a freeman at the other end of the world, I believe they would go thither for the mere pleasure of extirpating him." Rousseau's denunciation of the French accords well with the description of the French in the adjective

4. I am indebted to Dr. Anthony W. Shippy of the University of Indiana for pointing out that the motto has a double source.

5. James Boswell, *An Account of Corsica, The Journal of a Tour to that Island; and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* (London, 1768), p. 184. All page numbers in the text of this paper refer to this first edition.

6. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed., G. B. Hill, revised and enlarged by L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934), II, 108.

clause at the end of the first sentence of the letter, "who, being Slaves themselves, would willingly reduce all Mankind to the same State of Servitude."

Several times in *An Account of Corsica* Boswell, like the writer of the letter, urges the British to share with the Corsicans the blessings of liberty which British people have always known. Boswell adds to this humanitarian appeal a prudential one just as does the writer of the letter. On p. 21, for example, Boswell points out that an alliance of any European maritime nation with Corsica would afford that nation control of the Mediterranean and "that vessels stationed in the ports of Corsica might be formidable to France, as the western side of the island is directly opposite to the extensive coast of Provence, on which a descent might be made with cruisers in a very short time." This observation from Boswell's book is expressed in the letter as a warning to Britain: "If the French should conquer Corsica, what a considerable Addition of Strength will they acquire by it in the Mediterranean."

There are a few minor comparisons of diction and orthography that are not important in themselves but when added to the other internal evidence strengthen the case for Boswell's authorship of the letter. In *An Account of Corsica* the first adjective applied to the Corsicans is "brave," and this adjective is the one most often used by Boswell throughout the book to describe the Corsicans. To characterize the Corsicans this adjective is employed three times in the pseudonymous letter and also three times in Boswell's signed CORSICAN CONTRIBUTION. In his preface to *An Account of Corsica* Boswell gives a defence of his orthography. He explains that he follows Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* in retaining the "k" after "c" in a word like "publick" and the spelling "our" in a word such as "honour." The example of the latter type is "honourable" in the letter and "Honour" in the CORSICAN CONTRIBUTION. There is no example of the first type in either piece of writing. I mention the absence of the first type only because the presence of the archaic spelling in the signed appeal and the modern spelling in the letter could be cited as evidence that the letter was not by Boswell. Nouns are capitalized in both the signed appeal and the letter.

Probably the most cogent evidence of Boswell's authorship is the reference in the letter to "Mr. Boswell's Advertisement." In his anonymous and pseudonymous writings in the newspapers Boswell frequently publicized himself or his writings. Of the many examples that might be cited perhaps the most notorious from the year of this letter are Boswell's anonymous "Verses on seeing the Print of James Boswell, Esq. in the Corsican Dress," or Boswell's anonymous "Notice of James Boswell's having been seen on top of a hearse at an execution at Tyburn;"

these were in the *London Chronicle* for 5 October 1769 and 24 October 1769.

On the basis of this comparison of certain aspects of Boswell's *An Account of Corsica*, his signed CORSICAN CONTRIBUTION in the *Freeman's Journal*, and the pseudonymous letter in the *Freeman's Journal*, supplemented by the known facts of Boswell's Irish tour and his newspaper writing habits, it seems reasonable to conclude that Boswell adopted the persona of A FREE HIBERNIAN in order to publicize his fund-raising campaign for the Corsicans. Although this letter adds little to Boswell's stature as a writer, it does add to the rather sparse documentation for the only trip that Boswell ever made to Ireland. It also gives further proof of his skill and zeal as a propagandist.

RICHARD C. COLE

*Davidson College.*

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