The Yale Boswell

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Some years ago the distinguished British historian J.H. Plumb predicted, possibly with some tongue in cheek, that the lives of James Boswell and Horace Walpole would be "recorded in greater detail than any other two lives in the history of mankind."³ Thirty years later this prophecy stands confirmed for the most part. The Walpole project at Yale University has been recently completed with a five-volume index to the massive correspondence running to forty-three volumes. The Boswell project also at Yale with quarters in the Sterling Memorial Library adjoining the Walpole project is still in process of completing Plumb's prophecy, but the publication in 1984 of the final volume of Boswell's biography by Frank Brady of the City University of New York represents an important step in making James Boswell possibly the best known person of the eighteenth century, if not of human history. Brady's volume completes the biography begun forty years ago by Frederick A. Pottle, Boswellianissimus, as Donald Greene calls him.² Not published until 1966 by McGraw-Hill, Pottle's volume James Boswell, the Earlier Years, 1740-1769 was reissued though unrevised in 1985 with Brady's James Boswell, the Later Years, 1769-1795. The
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Pottle-Brady biography represents a distillation from six thousand documents at Yale, descriptions of which will soon be published by McGraw-Hill in a three-volume catalogue. Most of these documents have been published in one form or another since 1928 when the first volume of the Isham Collection of Boswell's papers was published. Significantly, McGraw-Hill has published not one but two histories of the Boswell papers, David Buchanan's version in 1974, *The Treasure of Auchinleck*, and Pottle's version in 1982, *Pride and Negligence, The History of the Boswell Papers*. That there are two histories differing in scope, organization, tone, and sometimes fact is itself eloquent testimony to the problems of collecting, financing, editing, and publishing the Boswell journals and correspondence, problems that continue to dog this great scholarly venture today.

The Isham Collection edited by Pottle and Geoffrey Scott and published privately by Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham 1928-1937 in eighteen quarto volumes and an elaborate index volume was known primarily to Johnson and Boswell specialists and to collectors, and it took the Yale project beginning in 1950 to make the Boswell papers widely known to scholars and the serious reading public alike. Pottle's first volume, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, was a best seller in 1950, but the other eleven published volumes of journals and correspondence covering the years 1763-1785 have not been widely sold. Pottle reports in *Pride and Negligence* that the *London Journal* by the beginning of 1953 had sold 458,000 copies and by 1958 831,000 copies, but most of the others have sold only a few thousand copies. These twelve volumes, all but one edited by Pottle and his collaborators, make up the trade edition, and two more volumes covering the last ten years of Boswell's life are to conclude the series. McGraw-Hill is also publishing a little-publicized research series of the journals and correspondence with elaborate annotation. In contrast to the twelve volumes issued in the popular series, only four, including Pottle's *Pride and Negligence* have been issued in the research series, and there is a backlog of completed volumes by a number of scholars awaiting publication. During this same period, 1950-1984, the Walpole project, with which the Boswell project has been compared regularly for half a century, published thirty-three volumes and completed its work. No Walpole biography, however, of the magnitude of the Pottle-Brady biography of
Boswell has emerged. The strategy of the Walpole editors clearly was to publish all the documents first as a basis for a definitive biography. On the other hand, the Boswell editors placed a higher priority on a definitive biography before all the documents were printed and thoroughly annotated in the research edition. Which was the better strategy scholars must determine for themselves.

With documents piled, as Brady observes, like Pelion upon Ossa,\(^4\) the biographer of Boswell runs the risk of seeing the documents but not the man, and his narrative may become clogged with insignificant detail. Both biographers have succeeded admirably in extricating the man from the six thousand documents. Since the Pottle half of the biography has become a modern classic during the last twenty years, little more needs to be said about it except in its relationship to the second half of the biography by Pottle's former student, and for the last thirty-five years, colleague, collaborator, and friend, Frank Brady. The two volumes have much in common as would be expected since they spring from a close association of nearly forty years. Both biographers see Boswell in substantially the same way, and both project essentially the same image of themselves as narrators and judges of Boswell's life and work. Both aim at a general audience rather than at the Boswell-Johnson specialist or the eighteenth-century scholar. Through a variety of devices both strive to shape this general reader's perception of Boswell. For this general reader's benefit they also place all documentation at the end; the scholarly reader finds himself constantly flipping pages to determine sources.

Brady begins with a summary of Boswell's earlier years culminating in the triumphs of 1768-1769 in letters and the law, in excellent prospects for a solid career as author, jurist, and possibly Member of Parliament, and in what appeared to be a successful marriage. Again in chapter nine Brady reviews these golden years at the end of the 1760's and asks what went wrong from 1769 until 1780 when Boswell at forty entered middle age. Essentially, Brady's is a story of Boswell's failure after 1769 to attain his several goals, not only by the age of forty but by the time of his premature death at fifty-five. Brady details seven important failures: (1) his legal career in Scotland was neither successful nor satisfying, (2) he never entered Parliament or secured other government preferment that he so diligently
sought, (3) he was never able to manage his financial affairs, (4) his marriage was unrewarding, (5) his health was poor because of alcohol abuse and repeated venereal disease, (6) he failed abysmally at the English bar, and (7) he did not advance the fortunes of his family or his estate at Auchinleck. In an especially apt analogy Brady finds Boswell at forty-three a "middle-aged Rasselas" seeking to make his "choice of life" (237). Brady sees three options for Boswell, ranging from the realistic to the less realistic to the least realistic: (1) a successful career in the Scots law like his father, (2) uncertain prospects for a parliamentary seat that would keep him in London much of the year, and (3) a transfer to the English bar. Needless to say, Boswell chose the least realistic option, noting that "Other people built castles in the air" while "he tried to live in his" (238). Boswell rejected the advice of Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke to make the sensible choice, the Edinburgh bar with its prospects of rising to the summit of the profession in the Court of Session judgeship that his father, Lord Auchinleck, had held until his death at seventy-five, because, as Brady stresses throughout his volume Boswell "hated Scotland" (238). Brady may protest too much here since Boswell also claimed that his pride in his Scottish landed family founded in 1504 was his "predominant passion." Brady decides, however, that Boswell was only Boswell when he followed inner promptings usually culminating in immediate enjoyment (259, 317), and his true bent was London and all its pleasures and associations with persons and places. Boswell, says Brady, "belonged in London as much as Johnson did" (268); London was the only place where Boswell's literary genius, like Johnson's might flower.

Though skillful in all aspects of the art of biography, Brady is at his best in his discussion of how these extraordinary literary gifts achieved fruition in spite of Boswell's signal failures in other aspects of life. Today, as Brady accurately points out, Boswell is the most widely read writer of the eighteenth century (486), even though Boswell "never regarded himself primarily as an author" (91). Boswell's outstanding literary achievement, as both Pottle and Brady make clear, is his journal. Brady writes with particular insight about Boswell's virtual identification of journal and life; the journal not only preserved life in a written record but was life itself in a very real sense. Brady notes two of Boswell's fantasies from his journals of 1776 and 1777 as
essentially accurate: "I should live no more than I can record," and "by burning all my journal and all my written traces of former life, I should be like a new being" (146-7). From the journal came the best seller of Boswell's early career _An Account of Corsica_, still "a very pleasant book" according to Pottle, and both the masterpieces of the later years, the _Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson_ in 1785 and the _Life of Johnson_ in 1791, all containing many scenes without alteration from the journal. In so doing Boswell developed a new kind of biography.

Brady preserves the distinction Pottle makes in his half of the biography between the Plutarchian biography of Paoli in the 1768 _Account of Corsica_ and the Flemish portrait of Johnson in the _Tour to the Hebrides_ and the _Life of Johnson_, but of necessity Brady carries this important distinction much further. Brady's chapter seventeen, which analyzes the art of the _Life of Johnson_ is unlikely to be improved upon. He develops Pottle's Plutarchian-Flemish distinction into ethical and anecdotal types of biography, as represented in earlier lives of Johnson by Sir John Hawkins for the ethical type and by Mrs. Piozzi for the anecdotal type. Brady sees Boswell's uniting of these two types as "a crucial moment in the history of biography" (425); Boswell enriched the genre further by adding a third dimension, psychological analysis. _The Life of Johnson_ is also for Brady one of the great eighteenth-century epics, with Pope's _Iliad_, _Rape of the Lock_, and _Dunciad_, Fielding's _Tom Jones_, Gibbon's _Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_, and Blake's major prophetic poems. Boswell's Johnson is a "struggling moral hero of every day life—a hero and a life to be presented on an epic scale" (426). To these four dimensions of the new biography Boswell added yet a fifth, mimesis, or "presentness," as Brady calls it; Boswell succeeded in getting Johnson to present himself, in conversations and in a number of written documents. For Brady "Presentness is the brightest of Boswell's talents": Boswell is not only the first but the best "mimetic biographer" (428).

Another strength of Brady's fine seventeenth chapter on the art of the _Life of Johnson_ is his adept treatment of the distinction between Boswell the biographer and Boswell the character in the _Life of Johnson_. Boswell the character is questioner, manipulator, and stage manager, but also the "artless I" (441) or the _naïf_ that Boswell the biographer developed in the _Tour to the Hebrides_; Brady finds Boswell "the greatest writer in
English to play the *naïf* consistently" (298). Boswell the author was also willing to take the risk of being regarded by readers as Boswell the naïve questioner in the *Life of Johnson*. To some extent George Bernard Shaw was right, according to Brady, in saying that Boswell was the dramatist who invented Johnson (431). Brady rightly insists, "There never was nor ever can be an 'objective' Johnson" (431). Boswell aimed for an authentic rather than an objective portrait. All Johnson's friends saw him in different ways, and Johnson had his own view of himself, but Boswell created a more authentic Johnson than others did, and his artless questioner technique helped to bring out new dimensions of Johnson's extraordinary presence.

In contrast to Donald Greene's view of Boswell as "a compiler of ana..."9 Brady sees Boswell as reworking his Johnsoniana in every conceivable way to present Johnson as the "majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom" (437) while at the same time achieving the most authentic portrait ever given. In Brady's view Boswell was not carrying out the traditional pattern, in Donald Greene's words again, of "the disciple cutting down the master"10 or perpetrating "one of the most successful hatchet jobs in the history of biography."11 Although he mentions no names, Brady explicitly rejects this latter view associated with Greene and others "that the *Life of Johnson* is basically a covert attack on its subject" (425). Brady slyly observes in his endnote to this statement, "I may perhaps be forgiven for not having noted where this bizarrerie occurs" (564). Bizarre or not, the persistence of this view, most often linked with Greene's name, and the regularity with which undergraduates and other general readers come up with it works against a cursory dismissal.12

Although many, perhaps most, Boswellians share Brady's distaste for Greene's position, some of Greene's questions about "speculative analysis of Samuel Johnson's psychological make-up"13 on the part of recent Johnson biographers may be raised about Brady's psychoanalysis of Johnson's disciple. Brady appears to use his psychoanalysis of Boswell primarily as a way of relating Boswell to the late twentieth-century reader; his emphasis is on how much of Boswell there is in his modern readers. Brady's method seems akin to Stanley Fish's analysis of the reader as one who participates in the experience of literature and is educated by this experience.14 Brady's book is replete
with phrases that link Boswell to the reader or instruct the reader how to evaluate Boswell: "our Boswell," "like most of us," "each of us," "we all share," "our worst mistakes," "our expectations." Of Boswell's ethical deficiencies Brady observes, "we can blame him, if we must" (130), but clearly we modern readers must not blame Boswell because in so doing we are also blaming ourselves. Readers who find the Fish method appealing will also like Brady's. "Only God always sees what we are about" (236), says Brady to remind the apprehensive reader that Boswell's fears that his father was spying on him even after death were unjustified. Similarly, the reader schooled in the Fish approach who has involved himself in Boswell's habitual self-deception will find Brady's advice helpful: "Each of us deserves an exemption from the general laws that govern humanity, but must come sadly to realize that the world does not share this opinion" (413). Although analyses like these and attempts to shape reader response are certainly a part of the main tradition of English literary biography, other successful literary biographies in recent years such as Carlos Baker's *Hemingway* and Bernard Crick's *George Orwell* have granted that, in Crick's words, "none of us can enter into another person's mind." Baker and Crick, among other recent biographers, have left the reader with greater opportunity to make his own judgment from the documents; they have also offered the reader more evaluations from contemporaries who couldn't read Boswell's mind but saw only his behavior. To be sure, Brady is aware of some of these problems, as he notes "how difficult it is for him [the biographer] to set aside his own perceptions so that he can attend to those of his subject," and further, "The only character he is certain to illuminate is his own" (486). Each school of biography has its adherents.

The *Life of Johnson* in its two expensive volumes was a "runaway success," as Brady reports; 1689 sets were soon sold at a profit of over £1550 for Boswell, and a second edition was needed the very next year (453, 466). To the modern reader the *Life* is the capstone of Boswell's career, and if he has shared Boswell's experiences, emotions and thoughts as Brady wants him to, he expects to share in Boswell's sense of satisfaction. Literary success, however, was only second best to Boswell because his primary goals that Brady develops so well throughout his volume—wealth, political prominence, and advancement of the
family of Achinleck—he did not meet, and Boswell, though only fifty-one with a family heritage of longevity, had but four years left. The habits of a lifetime caught up with him before he could reach his goals, and Brady describes his painful death from uraemia and the ravages of venereal disease that had plagued him throughout his life. The reader who has been led by Brady up to this point may be disappointed by the absence of final reflections on the life and work of Boswell by his learned but kindly guide. The conclusion is succinct, perhaps unduly so, as Brady points simply to Boswell's living record in his correspondence, in his three most noted published works, and "finally in that journal which has made him famous a second time in this century" (491).

The strengths of the Pottle-Brady biography are manifold, as this analysis has shown, and weaknesses, if there are any, ultimately come down to the preferences of individual readers. It is the only comprehensive biography of Boswell that has ever been done. Indeed, it could not have been done until now and at Yale, and it will not need to be done again. Still, a reviewer must echo Milton, "Yet much remains/To conquer still"; the research edition languishes. This monumental biography does not exist in vacuo, but its validity is dependent to a large extent on the research edition that documents it, and the research edition for the most part waits in the wings. Eighteenth-century scholars have awaited the research volumes for thirty-five years, not simply for information about Boswell and Johnson but for the light the exhaustive annotation of the journal and correspondence sheds on the eighteenth century as a whole. They can only hope the completion of the biography will serve as the catalyst for placing the research volumes in their hands.

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NOTES

1 J.H. Plumb, Men and Centuries (Boston, 1963), p. 223.


5 Pottle, *Pride and Negligence*, p. 3.


