The Scottish Education of James Boswell

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When the very young Boswell published anonymously his *Ode to Tragedy* and dedicated it to "James Boswell," a man of "extensive erudition,"¹ he was having fun, not laboring under the illusion that he was learned or that anyone would think so. If from time to time, particularly during his twenties, he showed an inordinate fondness for the paraphernalia of learning, it was not so much to pretend to erudition as to enjoy the momentary fancy that he was learned. Real knowledge and genuine intellectual achievement he valued highly, never confusing the appearance for the actuality, however, and never satisfied with tinkling brass as long as there was solid gold. The often recurring frank admissions in his private Journal, letters, and published works of mental and intellectual limitations attest to a life-long unwavering standard of excellence and a continual dissatisfaction with his failure to measure up to his own high standards. What he aspired to be but was not brought him little comfort; and as if he feared that his occasional "egotism and self-applause" would be taken seriously—and how ridiculous he managed to make himself at times!—he disarmed his critics by announcing that such actions were performed with a "conscious smile."²

Boswell’s Scottish educational background furnished the foundation for whatever learning he possessed. This was augmented by independent reading, conversation, and travel; and he brought to bear upon his reading of literature a critical judgment by no means distinguished but independent and solid enough to give interest and validity to his account of one of the most engaging groups of wits and writers of history.

While most of Edinburgh’s lads received their pre-college training at that city’s High School, Boswell attended the select private school of Mr. James Mundell.³ Here was inculcated in him a fondness for Addi-

¹ James Boswell, *Ode to Tragedy* (Edinburgh, 1761)
² Memoirs of James Boswell, *European Magazine*, XIX (May, 1791), 324
son’s prose, and he was drilled in the fluent and correct writing of English with few Scoticism. Meanwhile his father provided for him in their Edinburgh household a strict tutelage by young men preparing for the ministry in the Church of Scotland. While at Mundell’s and at the University of Edinburgh, to which he later proceeded, Boswell enjoyed a substantial training in Latin and was required to read with understanding and with thoroughness much of the poetry of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Juvenal. He was drilled in the fundamentals of logic at the University and in the theory of poetry and the history of criticism. His teachers thought enough of his performance to encourage him to aspire to become an author. After pursuing his regular courses at the University, he began the study of law. In 1759 he went to the University of Glasgow, where he studied moral philosophy and rhetoric under Adam Smith. His sudden departure from Glasgow a few months after his entrance into the University marked, except for a partial winter’s study of civil law at Utrecht, the end of Boswell’s formal training. Restless for the more exciting pursuit of ideas in action, his university was henceforth to be the great school of men and manners, and experience his teacher.

That Boswell applied himself while at the University of Edinburgh there need not be any doubt. He left us a record of his study routine in a letter written to his friend William Temple December 16, 1785,¹ in which we learn that from nine o’clock in the morning until ten he attended law class, from ten to eleven o’clock he studied at home, from one to two o’clock in the afternoon he attended a class in Roman antiquities, spending the remainder of the afternoon and evening with his books. He never walked except on Saturdays. During a portion of the time that he was in Holland he subjected himself to a similar routine. We learn from his Inviolable Plan, a list of self-commands for his personal advancement, that while there he set aside specific times during the day for the study of Ovid in the original Latin, certain hours for Ovid in French, and other periods for the study of French and Greek languages and the reading of Voltaire and other books.²

As we think about Boswell’s educational background, we should not overlook the importance of his home environment, which has already been suggested as strict. His father, whom he called a “sound


scholar," had one of the finest private collections of "curious editions" of Greek and Roman classics. In fact he had collated manuscripts and different editions of Anacreon and other Greek poets with painstaking care; and when Boswell brought Johnson on a visit to Auchinleck, his father, who as Lord of Session in the Scottish courts carried the title of Lord Auchinleck, was interesting enough as a scholar to entertain his guest with good conversation and thus avoid clashing with him on such controversial subjects as Whiggism and Episcopacy. James was impressed with how well his father remembered Greek, especially when he thought of his inadequate recall of recent happenings. His grandfather, as well as his father, would exercise his memory by learning passages of ancient poets by heart. Lord Auchinleck, indeed, gave him a "premium" for each of Horace's Odes that he memorized; and soon he was able to repeat more than forty of them, of which he said that quite a number of fragments remained in his recollection for a long time "and are in readiness for quotation, which is a very good thing." Lord Auchinleck believed that in the ancients was "a peculiar strength of thought and expression," and he was happy to receive from James, who was in Holland at the time, the news that he had returned to the study of Latin and Greek authors, for he thought they would provide for his son "a mine of inexhaustible knowledge and entertainment."

Despite this encouragement from home and the assiduity with which he seems to have applied himself to his studies at Edinburgh, Boswell throughout his life suffered from what he considered a fundamental deficiency in his Scottish education. This sense of intellectual inferiority we first notice with reference to a conversation between himself, Erakine, and Hume at the latter's place in Edinburgh in 1762. As he was to do many times while moving about in Johnson's circle, he had started on this occasion, as it appears, a number of conversational balls rolling; and now and then during the course of the evening

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11 *Private Papers*, XII, p. 144

he even "spoke tolerably"—in fact, much better than he felt his meager knowledge entitled him to speak.\textsuperscript{13} When he was surprised at the respect with which Voltaire treated him as he visited the Frenchman at his home in Switzerland, he confessed that he probably should have "a good opinion" of himself, "but from my unlucky education I cannot get rid of a mean timidity as to my worth."\textsuperscript{14} Several years later he was embarrassed when Johnson questioned him about his knowledge of Latin, for he was unable to say he knew much of it.\textsuperscript{15} And on another occasion he was forced to admit to Dr. Johnson that he had learned only a little Greek, "as is too generally the case in Scotland."\textsuperscript{16} Stimulated by his broadening contacts with Rousseau and Voltaire towards the close of 1764, he wrote to Temple, his undergraduate companion in the "studies of Antiquity," marveling at the man he had finally become in spite of having been "debased by the unhappy education in the smock of Edinburgh."\textsuperscript{17}

The Edinburgh of Boswell's day was certainly not what it had been in the old days before the Union of Scotland and England. He often referred to the ill effects of the Union and expressed regret for the changes that had taken place. This regret was especially explicit in a pamphlet\textsuperscript{18} in which he deplored the social and economic deterioration of Edinburgh society as a result of the Union. The following account of conditions during and just after the Union, before basic changes had time to materialize, is suggestive of the state of affairs existing before Boswell's day and, by contrast, of conditions during his life time. By the end of the seventeenth century most of the remnants of the official state were still in evidence and "graced the capital," yet not aware of the "economical scythe" which later mowed it down:

All our nobility had not then fled. . . . Philosophy had become indigenous in the place, and all classes, even in their gayest hours, were proud of the presence of its cultivators. . . . And all

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, I, pp. 129-130
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Private Papers}, IV, p. 136
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, XI, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Life of Johnson}, III, p. 407
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Private Papers}, IV, pp. 20-21
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Reflections on the Late Alarming Bankruptcies in Scotland} (Edinburgh, 1772)
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this was still a Scotch scene... The whole country had not
to be absorbed in the ocean of London... Edinburgh
was still more distant in its style and habits. It had then its
own independent tastes, ideas, and pursuits.\[19\]

When Boswell pried between the northern metropolis and the southern, however, he was always relieved to exchange the husk of a once splendid capital for the bustling activity and limitless variety of London. Splendor, wit and learning were on lean days in Scotland.

The description which Dr. William Robertson gives of the University of Edinburgh in 1768 must in essential respects have been what it was ten years earlier, when Boswell passed through its halls: some of the buildings looked like "alms-houses for the reception of the poor," and the classrooms ("teaching rooms of the professors") were "mean, straitened, and inconvenient."\[20\] While improvements were going on in the city, the university alone remained "in such a neglected state, as to be generally counted a dishonour to the city of Edinburgh, and to this part of the kingdom."\[21\] Johnson said of the insufficiency of learning in Scotland that it was "like bread in a besieged town: every man gets a little, but no man gets a full meal," and that men brought up in the universities of Scotland

obtain a mediocrity of knowledge, between learning and ignorance, not inadequate to the purposes of common life, which is,
I believe widely diffused among them.\[22\]

Samuel Rogers gave an account of a conversation in which someone on being asked if Bentely was a Scotsman replied, "No, Sir; Bentely was a great Greek scholar."\[23\]

It was this city, this university that formed the background for most of Boswell's formal education. When he visited Eton in the fall of 1789 to prepare for his son's entry there, he was invited to dine with the headmaster Dr. Davies at the fellows' table; and with his "classical quotations very ready," he made a creditable showing to his own surprise: "How should one who has had only a Scotch education be quite at home at Eton?" That he managed to be at home there he

\[19\] William Robertson, Memorial Relating to the University of Edinburgh, quoted in the Life of Johnson, I, pp. 467-468

\[20\] Ibid.

\[21\] Life of Johnson, II, p. 363

explained by the fact that he possessed "the art of making the most of" what he had. This gift he and his friend Temple recognized near the close of their lives as they talked of it—one of those rare times when old friends get together after long years of absence. Boswell had gone to Cornwall to visit Temple in 1792 when one rainy afternoon they enjoyed sorting by years their correspondence from 1757. Temple agreed that considering the "narrowness" of Boswell's education, it was wonderful what he had made of himself, and then the two of them laughed at Boswell's wonderful art of displaying extraordinary symptoms of learning and knowledge when I had read so little in a regular way. Yet I had, as the French say, Seuille a great many books and had, like Johnson, the art of quickly seizing a general notion from perusing a small part.

As we have noticed, this was not truly the kind of learning he wished to possess. When Temple's third son John James read to Boswell each morning while he was on this visit a lesson in the Greek of Homer's Iliad and the Latin of Cicero's Orations, he felt refreshed and pleased to think that he might yet recover his learning if he applied himself again. "What a difference it would make in my existence should I do so! I trust I shall." It was this very high opinion of the worth of genuine learning that served as a foil for his limitations:

Often do I upbraid and look down upon myself when, in contemplation of the heights of learning to which one may attain, I view my own inferiority, and I think how many others... are above.

Furthermore, agreeing with Johnson that a man is truly happy in proportion to his knowledge, Boswell, whose appetite for learning was whetted by the limited amount he did have, was keenly sensible of the joys which knowledge affords.

As a matter of fact, Boswell actually underrated his intellectual accomplishments. He prepared himself for the writing of his biography of Johnson by extensive reading of biographical works and others that made special use of conversation. The Life itself amounts to a contemporary and recent literary history of Britain; for it contains, as the

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24 Letters of James Boswell, II, p. 380
25 Private Papers, XVIII, pp. 144-145
26 Ibid., XVIII, p. 144
27 Letters of James Boswell, II, p. 304
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author himself stated, “a view of much of the literature, and many of the literary men, of Great Britain for more than a century.”28 He was certainly an authority on eighteenth century literature of travel, for he seems to have read everything that was available in this field. He was rather straightforward and confident in assessing works of a number of historians.29 In several of his Hypochondriack essays he reflected a conversance with much of the literature of hypochondria. He had read enough books on education to make comparative references to Locke’s writings on education.30 His critical independence on any number of occasions stood him in good stead as he disagreed with Johnson on evaluations of certain works of literature. The more liberal views which he expressed in his arguments with Johnson on Richardson and Fielding, for instance, are generally impressive to modern readers of the works of those two novelists.

The sum total of Boswell’s education was comprised of his family background, his formal education in Scotland which seemed to him so inadequate, his travels and great variety of personal contacts, and his peculiar traits of character and personality that determined his reading and intellectual interests and gave direction to his experiences with men and manners. Had the ingredients been otherwise or distributed in different proportions, the product would have been of another hue. Boswell conceivably would have been the truly learned man that he yearned to be and, therefore, perhaps much more stable and comfortable. But his learning and stability might well have crowded out that which was distinctively Boswellian in him. One can almost conclude that he himself believed this, for several times he wrote in his Journal that he was quite willing to be whatever he was becoming.

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29 See, for instance, Private Papers, IX, p. 91

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