

James Boswell

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James Boswell, biographer, was born in 1740, the eldest son of Alexander Boswell, of Lord and Lady Auchinleck. Auchinleck Castle in Ayreshire near the Irish Sea with more than 20,000 acres had been given in 1500 to Thomas Boswell by James IV of Scotland. Our Boswell wrote proudly of his family's royal connections, expecting thereby to impress his hero Dr. Johnson. Lord Auchinleck the father, a stern, learned Scottish Lord Justice, even though revered, never related warmly to his talented, romantic, unpredictable son. His mother, a loving pious woman, imparted strict Presbyterian ideas of sin, damnation, and hell to her highly imaginative son. Because of heavy legal duties the family spent most of Boswell's formative years in Edinburgh, while he spirit and fantasy reverted constantly to the beauty and romance of their Ayershire home. A timid, nervous child with recurrent terrors of ghosts and goblins, he grew up in the dark narrow streets of Edinburgh. Though schooled soundly in neoclassical disciplines, he disliked its drab, unyielding conformity. As he writes, "I was to sing notes of woe, while parents and theologians make a heaven of our misery." Private tutors at home instilled in him a love of literature and learning. At age 12 he indulged in a psychosomatic illness that freed him from classroom tedium, a forerunner of a parade of hypochondriac and emotional disturbances. With home tutors and small academies he mastered the basics of a neoclassical education and fostered his unique talents for observation and expression. The great writers of his time became his idols, poets, historians, and essayists.

He especially delighted in Johnson's "Rambler" essays, for their forceful logic, lofty language and for their admonitions on a range of moral issues. As a teenager Boswell vowed to meet their oracular author.

Lord Auchinleck naturally expected his eldest son to follow in the family tradition and practice law as an advocate. His son acceded without enthusiasm. The dry bones of law did not suit his taste, but he argued well in court, usually in defense of underdogs. His legal studies in Edinburgh did give him access to learned and eminent society. By then he had proved brilliant in advanced studies of literature and commentary. His facile pen was always ready with poems and literary fantasy. He was a romantic before his time, the time of Enlightenment.

Melancholia was an essential feature of the romantic temperament, and Boswell never failed to cultivate its merits. He attributed his own to a maternal trait, and he nursed moments of depression into valiant turmoil. Whenever forced into tedious routine, he sank easily into spells of indolence, self-doubt, and dark dismay, times which abound in his journals and letters. The fits of depression occur so frequently as to suggest that Boswell was proud of his mercurial, sensitive nature. No doubt he did suffer from a type of mental instability, nowadays termed manic depressive or bipolar. He tried to control melancholia with large doses of conviviality with important kindred souls, both male and female, and his ready charm and witty talk made him a favorite with both sexes.

He could convince listeners that they were sole object of his enthusiasm, and he gained a gilded reputation in polite and learned society. As he matured, he resorted to unhealthy cures for melancholia, such as alcohol, roistering, gambling, and harlots. His journals abound with remorse for these weak excesses. He recounts endless sexual exploits with whores and ladies of fashion, all in a fight against the darkness of depression. As a result, he reports repeated bouts of gonorrhoea, 15 in all, to be followed by forced abstinence for cure. Neither love nor intimate relations seemed to have been involved in these sexual frenzies. It is no wonder that his heirs hid his self revealing journals from public eyes.

Boswell's artistic gifts appealed to his many friends. He sang well, could act spontaneously, recited poetry of renown and of his own occasional verse, enjoyed the theater and fine arts. In short he was the "life of the party." Above all he valued humane, learned discourse.

Boswell had capacity for strong friendship. One of his most enduring friends was William Temple whose grandson and great grandson became Archbishops of Canterbury. Boswell rejected Scottish insularity and was drawn to England and to its wide range of interests and expression. Before bolting to London, he gained entry and friendship with David Hume and Adam Smith, both Scottish luminaries. At age 22 he passed his bar exams to paternal delight, and in Edinburgh circles literary and theatrical he became a minor figure, much to the discomfit of his father. Boswell himself wanted to be a writer.

In order to save his son from the perils of London, Lord Auchinleck agreed to send Boswell to Utrecht to study law. By then he had met and become enthralled with Dr. Johnson, but he embraced the chance for European tour.

Boswell's facility in language and his tenacious pursuit of dignitaries won him audience with notables such as Frederick the Great, Voltaire, and Rousseau, the last of whom became friendly and wrote an introduction to Paoli, the native hero of Corsican independence. After a tour of Italy Boswell set out on a madcap sail to Corsica, where he met up with Paoli and spent several weeks in romantic adventure. Boswell was lucky to escape unharmed to France where he met Rousseau's mistress and escorted her to London during a sexual marathon.

Once in England he had much to deal with. His pietistic mother had died, he jubilantly rejoined with Johnson; he established a law practice in Edinburgh, and most importantly for him he married appropriately if not richly. He loved and admired his wife who bore him five or more offspring. Their relationship reduced to some extent his extramarital excesses, and she always absolved the repentant sinner, even with signs of venereal infection.

His days were divided between family, law practice, and Johnson in London, but his chief pleasure lay in his daily journals and extensive correspondence. He wrote and published a well received book on Corsica, its history and his travels there, so successful that he became known as "Corsica Boswell." At times he would stop writing, but then

prompted by his vibrant memory he would catch up with the calendar. He was an inveterate writer, and he knew it, if no one else did.

In 1767 at Johnson's insistence the Literary Club accepted Boswell as member. His wit, geniality, and joie de vivre soon became legendary at Club meetings. He delighted in the various members, at first nine and later thirty, in particular Garrick the actor, Goldsmith the author, Reynolds the painter, Burke the orator, and especially Johnson the sage. Boswell found Gibbon unappealing, perhaps because the historian was too serious and tenacious. Bozzy's mellow baritone and talent for comic relief enlivened many a Club meeting, as vividly recorded in his journals. His relationship with Johnson grew stronger and became the most effective antidote to Boswell's fits of depression.

This remarkable friendship generated Boswell's greatest work, his "Life of Johnson," but at the same time it effectively blocked any publication by Boswell describing his observations about his hero until after the death of Johnson, who recognized the genius of these observations but did not allow their intimacy to be exposed to outside eyes. Boswell would take no steps that might endanger their friendship. While Johnson lived, Boswell published a wide variety of essays, and the frankness of these often damaged his reputation amongst social peers. His letters to intimates revealed extraordinary vibrancy unknown to the world until years later.

Johnson died peacefully in 1784, age 75. Boswell was devastated, adding to his sorrow over the loss of his wife from tuberculosis. His fellow Club member friend, Edmund Malone, came to his rescue and nursed his "Tour of the Hebrides" into book form by 1785. This proved a literary and financial success; to which prompted him and Malone to prepare his final masterpiece, the "Life of Johnson," some 600 pages which appeared in 1790, written from his journals, notes and memory. This likewise became an instant best seller, but Boswell was a broken man, plagued by depression and excesses of alcohol and prostitution. While working on a second edition of the "Life" with the help of his son and Malone, he died in 1795, age 54.
