

Dr. Johnson, 1709 – 1784



‘Literature’, said novelist Houellebecq on TV last week ‘is always evil’. Sam Johnson, as he is often called, said 300 years ago: ‘The aim of literature is to enable the reader to enjoy life or at the worst endure it’. He spent his life churning out volumes of literary, dramatic and poetic studies laced with acute insight and critical interpretation. His ‘Lives of the Poets’ earned him admiration mixed with indignation at his daring to criticize Shakespeare and Milton while defending them lovingly against attacks from the Continent. He was known as the Grand Cham of Literature. To envisage him we can best think of lesser men who have followed and worn his mantle in their way. The ungainly G. K. Chesterton resembled in size the lumbering 18th century figure whom Garrick called ‘the big man’. Both were ‘Apostles of Common Sense’. G.K.C. remarked that the common man knows he is not his brother’s equal but a better man than his brother when push comes to shoving. Dr. Johnson said, “No two people can be half an hour together but one shall acquire an evident

superiority over the other. Talk of men being naturally equal is such stuff as I used to talk to my mother when I first began to think myself a clever fellow, and she ought to have whipt me for it. The vulgar can never know they are right, but must submit themselves to the learned. The vulgar are the children in the State, and must be taught like children”.

He was able to temper this brute common sense with his devotion to Our Lord’s teaching, which he called “the great and only light to illuminate man’s darkness in this world”. He defended the Church doughtily against the attacks of Hume, Voltaire and the rationalist philosophers. At his death he received the ministrations of the Last Sacraments and then, says his biographer James Boswell, composed and uttered a prayer for ‘confirmation of his faith and hope and enlargement of his charity’ through his last Communion.

His habit of relating problems to theological principles put him in the fore front of the battle against slavery. He was in advance of his times in his diagnoses of “the planters” as the corrosive in the budding process of settling in the Americas, because of their exploitative practice. He is scathing in his assertions that “taxation is not tyranny” (and I cannot resist at this date mentioning his interest in a court case involving a character called Trecothick).

Throughout his life Sam Johnson battled against ill health. In childhood he suffered from smallpox and scrofula (TB of the lymph nodes) which left him blind in one eye and virtually deaf in one ear. He stands out as an example to us all of patient toil against hardship, without self-pity, until he had pulled himself by his own boot-straps out of unpromising beginnings. Suffering and deprivation were turned by him to success and fame. He began life in relative poverty. The website calls him ‘a formidable scholar’, yet for lack of funds he left Oxford without a degree. A few years of unsuccessful school-mastering left him struggling to live by his writing. His passion for the English language drove him to years of drudgery in his house in Gough Square where we can see the rooms lined with pigeon-holes where he directed his team in the venture which made him famous – the first real Dictionary of the English Language. Only when that was finished, two – thirds of his life having passed, did he taste success. He was awarded honorary Doctorates (at Oxford and Dublin) accepted and cherished by a grateful literary ‘establishment’ and gained his rightful place in society, loved and honoured then and to this day. And he said: ‘Prayer is a reposal of myself upon God and a resignation of all into his holy hand’. Amen to that!

Mac McLaughlin