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Dr Samuel Johnson : Life & Times

Johnson has a faithful chronicler in Boswell, whose life of Samuel Johnson makes us intimate with its subject matter to a degree rare in literature. But even the prying zeal of Boswell could not intercept many facts regarding the great man's early life. Johnson was born at Lichfield, the son of a book-seller whose pronounced Tory views he inherited and steadfastly maintained. From his birth he was afflicted with a malignant skin disease which all through his life affected his sight and hearing and caused many of the peculiarities that astonished and amused the friends of his later years. After being privately

educated, he proceeded to Oxford where he experienced the miseries and indignities that are lot of a poor scholar cursed with a powerful and aspiring mind. Leaving the University, he tried school-teaching, with no success married a woman twenty years older than himself, and then in 1737 went to London and threw himself into the squalors and abhorments of Great-street. In his Essay on Boswell's life of Johnson Macaulay has given an arresting description of the miseries endured by the denizens of Great-street and in this case the natural exaggeration of Macaulay is not quite misplaced. We know next to nothing regarding the life of Johnson during this early period. It is certain that it was wretched enough to cause the sturdy old fellow, in after years, to glance at this period of his life with a shudder of loathing, and to quench the curiosity of Boswell with ultra-Johnsonian vehemence. very slowly he won his way out of the gutter, fighting every step with bitter tenacity, for as he puts it in his poem of London

From the obscure position of a publisher's lack he became a poet of some note by the publication of London (1738), which was noticed by Pope; his Dictionary (1747-55) advanced his fame; then somewhat incomprehensibly he appears in the limelight as one of the literary dictators of London, surrounded by a circle of brilliant men. In 1762 he received a pension from the state, and the last twenty years of his life were passed in the manner most acceptable to him: dawdling, visiting, conversing, yet living with a gigantic vitality that made his fellows wonder. It is in these latter years that we find him imperishably figured in the pages of Boswell. All his tricks of humor - his bearishness, his gruff good-will, his silent and secret benevolences; his physical aberrations - his gurglings, his grunts, his grimaces, his puffings and wallowing; his futile superstitions, his deep and beautiful piety, his Tory prejudices, so often enormously vocal; his masterful and unsteering common sense, the devouring momentum of his conversational

powers, we find all these set out in the life of Samuel Johnson. He wrote little poetry and none of it, though it has much merit, can be called first-class. His first poem, London (1738), written in the heroic couplet is of great and sombre power. It depicts the vanities and the sins of the city life viewed from the depressing standpoint of an embittered and penurious poet. His only other longish poem is The Vanity of Human Wishes. The poem is imitation of the Tenth Muse of the Terenial, transfer to the activities of the mankind is general the gloomy convictions raised ten years earlier by the spectacle of London. The meter is the same as in London and there is the same bleakness of pessimism but the weight and power of emotion, the tremendous convictions and the stern immovability of the author, give the work a great value. There are many individual lines of solemn grandeur. It is very interesting and mind raising poem which enthralled and amused everybody in the literary circle.