

The Wisdom of Doctor Johnson*Alumni Prize Essay,*

read by

Joseph Hanley at the Commencement Exercises,
May 29, 1935

In this age of democracy, of social upheaval, of war and strife, when the dominant ambition of men is lust for power and fame, when the philosophy of the Epicurean blinds men to the fallacy of their ways, when religion, except among the few, is looked upon as a souvenir of unenlightened and retrogressive times, it is almost impossible to conceive of such a man as Dr. Johnson. During his lifetime men's actions were permeated with the Christian ideals of duty and justice; industrialism was in its infancy, rulers were governed by the precepts of justice and charity. Had he, or Burke, or Goldsmith, or any of that famous congregation foreseen the chaos that is our heritage, how they would have labored to prevent it! How they would have denounced this picture of sadness and desolation!

I have said that it is almost impossible to conceive of such a character as Dr. Johnson. How, then, shall I attempt to introduce to you this the queerest, the most remarkable, the most startling personage in English literature? For a half-century he dominated literature and society. He was the most vulgar of men in manner and yet the most popular; the most demanding and the most lenient; the harshest and yet the most lovable. He possessed a terrible temper, an unparalleled insolence, and a fierce hatred for contradiction. His character is so unorthodox that even this was enough to place him outside the rank and file of common humanity. Let us turn to his boyhood, that glorious time of awakening ambition, beautiful illusions, magnificent prospects, when youth, peering at the future with happy distortion, tingles with the joy of anticipation. Then we see Johnson as a grubby, unkept urchin rummaging among the treasures of his father's book-store in Staffordshire. Surrounded by the quiet beauty of rural England, far from the ceaseless milling of the distant city, the boy found in the drab and gloomy confines of the shop, his haven of delight. Searching for apples one day, he uncovered a long-forgotten volume of

Petrarch and thus the John Bull of England erudition was initiated into literature.

For him the struggle from poverty and obscurity to fortune and fame was bitter indeed, fraught with much hardship, sorrow and frustration. It was only after toilsome years of intense physical and mental labor that he reached his first milestone on the road to success: Pembroke College at Oxford. Shoulder to shoulder with the scions of aristocratic England, the ragged son of the bookseller procured his education—despised and unknown. Fortunately or otherwise, unfavorable circumstances caused his leaving before obtaining his degree; it was not until ten years had elapsed that the title of Doctor was conferred on him. For some succeeding years his noble intellect had to submit to the intolerable demands of teaching and hack work. Sickening of these, he abandoned all and proceeded to London—to failure and death, or to success and immortality.

His first published word was a satire written in poor imitation of Juvenal, and named, "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Though remarkable for sound judgment and beautiful expression, it is no masterpiece. It lacks, as does all his literary attempts, what was the life of Burke, the mystery of Blake, and the weapon of Byron: imagination. Because of this want he is no poet, but a mere dabbler in rhyme. Later in life, he published in the *Rambler* a series of short essays after the manner of the earlier *Spectator*. These, as his poetry and drama, are heavy, learned, and ornate, but they lack the delicate touch of Addison and the care-free geniality of Steele which had popularized this type of publication. He wrote a dramatic tragedy, "Irene" and a novel, "Rasselas;" both are pedantic and mediocre. His "Dictionary" and "The Lives of the Poets" are what place him among the ranks of those who deserve the crown of literary achievement. Research and time have made both obsolete, but in their day, they recognized no equals. His dictionary was the first consistent attempt to unify and classify the English language, and accordingly has had a great effect on the literature of succeeding ages.

The Johnson we have encountered so far has not inspired us with much respect and awe. We would rather deem him an average individual with somewhat more than average success. In what does his greatness lie?

W. H. Mabie has happily enlightened us. He has well said, "In some cases we remember a man because of the work he did; but in Johnson's case we remember the work because of the man who did it." His tremendous personality towered above the eighteenth-century children of fame. Until his death, Reynolds the painter, Burke the orator, Garrick the actor, Goldsmith the writer, were his to command. These men are classed with the greatest in the nation's history and it was they who were irresistibly drawn by the wit of Doctor Johnson. His ability as a conversationalist crowned him the king of his fellows. He would discourse learnedly on any of the popular topics of the day: books, politics, or religion. He delivered his opinions with the gusto of a politician, the rhetoric of an orator, and the finality of a king. Whether in the Harwich coach, on Fleet Street, or at his famous Club, he was always the inimitable Dr. Johnson, devastating in rebuke, impervious in command. His thunderous "Sirs" made men of learning quail, and retract their ill-advised words. It is these "Sirs" rolling down the centuries that reveal the man: utterly intolerable, utterly lovable.

Johnson's name would never have been inscribed on the scroll of deathless fame, had not Boswell, a young Scotchman, attached himself to him. He recognized in the Doctor, his earthly complement. What virtues he lacked—and they were many—the Doctor possessed in full measure. So great was his love for him that he gave up all—home, friends, career,—in order to serve him. Seven years after the great man's passing, the zealous young Scotchman reaped the fruit of his life's labour. At this time he completed the biography of Johnson's life that was so inspired and so revealing that it immortalized both himself and his master. A treatise on Johnson without a reference to Boswell would be far from complete.

In simple life Johnson was care-free and delighted in breaking the rules of conventionality. At one time he went hiking with an English Bishop. When they had attained the crest of a very high hill, and were resting from their exertions, Johnson, in a playful mood, threw himself on the ground and rolled down the other side, much to the surprise and chagrin of the good clergyman. Incidents such as this were common in his experiences. To his wife he was ever devoted and year after year he unfailingly observed the anniversary of her death. In

politics he was an advocate of the "old toryism." He believed that all should remain in the state in which they were born; they should not be forever attempting to rise, but should spend their time in perfecting themselves in the position in which God had placed them. This was the policy the first Tories advocated, and this was the policy followed by Johnson and his school.

In his concept of God and His relation to man Johnson was the direct, simple, Christian, with none of the hypocrisy of the Pharisee, but filled with the humility of his Master. His age was saturated with the heretical doctrines and propaganda of Rousseau, Hume and many others, but in the maze of conflicting opinion, the Doctor never deviated from the beliefs he held sacred. With Voltaire and Chesterfield, he denounced the optimism of Rousseau and condemned the irrationalism that was to be characteristic of the future Carlyle. His greatest fault was melancholy. He, who had been given so much, was denied the sensation of beauty. With no ear to sense the harmony of music, and no eye to perceive the beauty of art, is it any wonder that his soul, denied of these consolations, sickened of this changing reality and sank into a fit of unnatural despondency. We have examined this great man's virtues, we have disclosed his views, we have noted his eccentricities, but who can dissemble upon the wit, the contradiction, the humor of this man of strange achievements?

Oh that we might return to the days when that great man lived, to hear his thunderous "Sirs" resounding, to catch and hold the gems of wisdom pouring from his lips. Then surely we would feel the strength of his magnetism, know the secret of his personality. But that is quite impossible. Time has fled and we along with it. Like any other he passed into the shadows from which there can be no return. But not before he had set his house in order. He paid his debts, gave counsels to his friends, and resigned himself to the Will of his Maker. Thus, admired by his contemporaries and respected by his friends, passed the lover of all mankind, the help of the poor, the refuge of the destitute. He was as Carlyle called him "a genuine mass of manhood" and as such, men loved and honored him.

