



Samuel Johnson

Walter Jackson Bate

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W. Jackson Bate's Samuel Johnson has been hailed as a supreme example of the biographer's art and the first great modern life of Johnson. Bate's work is literary biography at its finest, delving into the character that formed Johnson's awesome intellect and fueled his prodigious output. When first published, this magisterial biography won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Samuel Johnson Details

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From Reader Review Samuel Johnson for online ebook

Gary Mesick says

Bate was a genius. I was fortunate enough to catch his course on "The Age of Samuel Johnson," where he walked us through most of this book day by day. I can still remember his lecture on Johnson's death--which is captured here. The definitive Johnson bio.

Sherry says

This was soooooo boring!

Dan says

"Samuel Johnson" by Walter Jackson Bate is a well-researched biography of this unique and wonderful genius. Cursed by poor health and poverty, Johnson rose not through bald ambition but purely by his will to learn and to be a positive force for enlightenment. Brutally honest with himself and shedding all illusion about his fellow man, he fought through periods of melancholy and near madness to enlist a personal faith that, along with help from generous and appreciative friends, sustained him adequately to become perhaps the most distinguished man of letters in English history.

Among his remarkable achievements is compilation of a comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language which he completed in a few years, while committees of dozens of scholars of other countries were taking decades to assemble dictionaries in their tongues. Helpful were his mastery of Greek and Latin and the classics and his near-perfect memory for what he had very widely read. With its apt citations it is considered a work of literature.

Other valuable works include the poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes", his highly original criticism of Shakespeare, biographies, biographical sketches called "Lives of the Poets", essays, and many speeches and lectures written for others for free and not for attribution to Johnson. For example, without formal training in the law, Johnson wrote legal lectures for delivery by the successor to the great Blackstone.

Another example. For a newspaper he wrote a number of Parliamentary speeches. It was illegal to report the actual speeches, so Johnson sent someone to listen to them and make notes on their context. From the notes and his fine knowledge of the world, Johnson invented speeches and printed them as disquisitions from a fictional land, so that his perceiving public could sense the issues involved. Johnson's speeches were often so far superior to the actual ones that the politicians began claiming them, and they came to be collected and reprinted as genuine.

Johnson is said to be after Shakespeare the most quoted man in the English language; much of it from conversation recorded by associates. He did his own thinking about everything, great or small. He could have been a withering satirist to match Swift but was by will or by nature generous, and from his own struggles and erudition was sympathetic to trials and obstacles threatening everyone and was likely wary of his power to inflict harm.

If you are wanting an easy read about Johnson and have not already done so, then try Boswell's "Life of Johnson". The drawback is that nearly all of that book is about the last third or fourth of Johnson's life; that is, when Boswell knew him. Still, that book is a solid classic.

This biography covers Johnson's entire life, and Bate fills in the years missing from Boswell and corrects errors. There are two quibbles. Bate writes in a style that is amiable, wise and non-academic, but a little too careful to read effortlessly. And he does a bit more of psychologizing than usual, though it is done well, and primarily for Johnson's formative years. That this won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize for biography should not deter anyone.

But it is Johnson himself who carries the day to make this an easy five-star recommendation.

Joseph Millo says

The author is brilliantly successful when he sticks to biography – Johnson's rise from abject poverty to renown, his dreams and failures, his perseverance against years of Grub Street anonymity, his marriage, his character and his literature. The author also excels at integrating literary criticism of Johnson's works into the biographical stream.

But I was sometimes frustrated when the author attempted to psychoanalyze Johnson. The author avoids modern medical terms to describe Johnson's most common physical and mental afflictions. Johnson suffered from Tourette syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression/despair. Yet these medical terms are never used. Instead the author spouts vague Freudian terms like "self-demand" and "superego". Throughout his life Johnson struggled against what he called "scruples" but the author repeatedly leaves the reader puzzled as to what Johnson meant. Only once, buried in a foot note, does the author identify scruples as acts of obsession and compulsion.

Johnson once referred to writing as the "epidemic conspiracy for the destruction of paper", probably referring to Grub Street writers. This book does NOT fall into that category. Highly recommended.

S.N. says

A great biography

Christopher Potter says

Extraordinary. Highly recommended for those who already appreciate Johnson. Not recommended for others.

Brian Willis says

This Pulitzer Prize winning biography is the definitive narrative of Johnson's life, though some readers may detect that it is from the "old school" of biography.

Though Bate likely did not have the medical terminology to describe it at the time, it is very clear from his descriptions of his psychological symptoms that Johnson suffered from chronic depression and obsessive compulsive disorder. The descriptions of his peculiar behaviors and physical tics are clearly OCD, and his self-accounts of massive "indolence" and an inability to work on his writing projects stem from depression; at times, he did not leave bed for days!

Also superb are the descriptions of Johnson's writing style and strengths, particularly when composing the Dictionary, Rasselas, and the Lives of the Poets. Stripping away the veneer of Boswell's hagiographic Life, Bate gets to the root of Johnson the man. This was clearly the reason why he won his second Pulitzer for this life, because it is an exemplar of the biographical genre. Essential for the Johnson intrigued and the literary historian.

Scott Macdougall says

Perhaps a test for biography is the degree to which the author's life has been changed by her encounter with her subject. A sense of the high wonder that Johnson can engender permeates Bate's book.

Jeff Wills says

The finest biography I've read to date. This enthralling and highly intelligent work of art is a real pleasure to read.

Adam Stevenson says

I'd say this is the best Johnson biography of them all. Better even than Boswell's, this not only gives us the words and the moments, but a plausible and interesting psychological meaning to them. I've read 5 or six lives of Johnson's now and this is my favourite.

Sharon says

too long-winded

Scott says

A labor of love by one of our best teachers and critics. Sympathetic. Well written, a pleasure to read.

Maria says

First rate biography.

William says

The Freudian psychoanalytic angle gets a little tiresome after a while, but otherwise an impressively researched, interestingly told narrative of a truly fascinating life.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

This biography is readable and worth respect regarding Professor Bate's scholarship and excellent style of writing with related references. The best of all Dr Johnson's biographies I have read.
