

**SAMUEL JOHNSON: THE LESLIE
STEPHEN LECTURE, DELIVERED IN
THE SENATE HOUSE,
CAMBRIDGE 22 FEBRUARY, 1907**

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Samuel Johnson: The Leslie Stephen Lecture, Delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge 22 February, 1907 by Walter Raleigh

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WALTER RALEIGH

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DELIVERED IN THE SENATE HOUSE
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BY
WALTER RALEIGH
KING'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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SAMUEL JOHNSON

THE honour that the University of Cambridge has done me by asking me to deliver the first Leslie Stephen lecture is the best kind of honour, for it appeals even more to affection than to pride. Like most men whose trade is lecturing, I have known many Universities ; but none of them can be so dear to memory as the first, the place of my early friendships, and dreams, and idleness.

A quarter of a century ago I heard Leslie Stephen lecture in the Divinity Schools of this place. I saw him once again, on the uplands of Cornwall, but I never again heard his voice. You will not expect from me, therefore, any reminiscences, or intimate appreciation of his character. But I can say something of what I believe was very imperfectly known to him, the regard and reverence that was felt for him by a younger generation. A busy man of letters, always occupied with fresh tasks, has little time to study the opinions of his juniors. He makes his progress from book to book, without looking back, and knows more of the pains of doing than of the pleasures of the thing done. Far on in his career, while he is still struggling with his difficult material, he discovers, to his surprise, that the younger world regards him as a triumphant dictator and law-giver. Something of this kind I think happened to Leslie Stephen. He woke up, late in life, to find himself an established institution. He was pleased, and half-incredulous, and he turned to his weary task again. But indeed he had been famous and influential far

longer than he knew. The work in literary criticism that was done by him, and by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, was unlike most of the criticism of the last age. Amid a crowd of treatises which directed attention chiefly to the manner of an author, it was a solid comfort to come across a critic who made it his business to grasp the matter, and who paid even a poet the compliment of supposing that he had something to say. There is no finer literary model than bare matter of fact; and Leslie Stephen's style, 'the lean, terse style' as it has been called, constantly aimed at this perfection. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, under his control, became a gymnasium for authors, a gymnasium where no one was permitted to exercise his muscle until he had stripped himself of those garments which ordinary literary society expects authors to wear. It was Leslie Stephen's aim to prove that this avoidance of superfluity is not the negation of criticism. He was nothing if not critical, but he endeavoured to identify his criticism with the facts, to make it the wall of the building, not a flying buttress. When he relaxed something of his rigour and severity, as he did in his latest studies, his ease was like Dryden's, the ease of an athlete; and the native qualities of his mind, his sincerity and kindness and depth of feeling, are nowhere more visible than in his latest and best prose. He still keeps close to his subject, but he permits himself an indulgence which he had formerly refused, and sometimes, for a few delightful sentences, speaks of himself.

There is no need for haste in estimating his work and his services to good letters. These will not soon be forgotten. I like to think that he would have approved my choice of a subject for the first of the lectures associated with his name. His enjoyment of books, he

said at the close of his life, had begun and ended with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Literature, as it is understood for the purposes of these lectures, is to include, so I am informed, biography, criticism, and ethics. If I had been commanded to choose from the world's annals a name which, better than any other, should serve to illustrate the vital relations of those three subjects to literature, I could find no better name than Samuel Johnson. He was himself biographer, critic, and moralist. His life is inseparable from his works; his morality was the motive power of all that he wrote, and the inspiration of much that he did. Of all great men, dead or alive, he is the best known to us; yet perhaps he was greater than we know.

The accident which gave Boswell to Johnson and Johnson to Boswell is one of the most extraordinary pieces of good fortune in literary history. Boswell was a man of genius; the idle paradox which presents him in the likeness of a lucky dunce was never tenable by serious criticism, and has long since been rejected by all who bring thought to bear on the problems of literature. If I had to find a paradox in Boswell I should find it in this, that he was a Scot. His character was destitute of all the vices, and all the virtues, which are popularly, and in the main rightly, attributed to the Scottish people. The young Scot is commonly shy, reserved, and self-conscious; independent in temper, sensitive to affront, slow to make friends, and wary in society. Boswell was the opposite of all these things. He made himself at home in all societies, and charmed others into a like ease and confidence. Under the spell of his effervescent good-humour the melancholy Highlanders were willing to tell stories of the supernatural. 'Mr. Boswell's frankness and gayety,' says Johnson, 'made

everybody communicative." It was no small part of Boswell's secret that he talked with engaging freedom, and often, as it seemed, with childish vanity, of himself. He had the art of interesting others without incurring their respect. He had no ulterior motives. He desired no power, only information, so that his companions recognized his harmlessness, and despised him, and talked to him without a shadow of restraint. He felt a sincere and unbounded admiration for greatness or originality of intellect. 'I have the happiness,' he wrote to Lord Chatham, 'of being capable to contemplate with supreme delight those distinguished spirits by which God is sometimes pleased to honour humanity.' But indeed he did not confine his interest to the great. He was an amateur of human life; his zest in its smallest incidents and his endless curiosity were infectious and irresistible. No scientific investigator has ever been prompted by a livelier zeal for knowledge; and his veracity was scrupulous and absolute. 'A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist,' said Johnson, 'who does not love Scotland better than truth.' Boswell was very far indeed from being a sturdy moralist, but he loved truth better than Scotland, better even than himself. Most of the stories told against him, and almost all the witticisms reported at his expense, were first narrated by himself. He had simplicity, candour, fervour, a warmly affectionate nature, a quick intelligence, and a passion for telling all that he knew. These are qualities which make for good literature. They enabled Boswell to portray Johnson with an intimacy and truth that has no parallel in any language.

† We owe such an enormous debt of gratitude to Boswell that it seems ungrateful to suggest what is nevertheless obviously true, that the Johnson we know

best is Boswell's Johnson. The *Life* would be a lesser work than it is if it had not the unity that was imposed upon it by the mind of its writer. The portrait is so broad and masterly, so nobly conceived and so faithful in detail, that the world has been content to look at Johnson from this point of view and no other. Yet it cannot be denied, and Boswell himself would have been the first to admit it, that there are aspects and periods of Johnson's career which are not and could not be fully treated in the *Life*. When Johnson first saw Boswell in Tom Davies's back shop, he was fifty-four years old and Boswell was twenty-two. The year before the meeting Johnson had been rescued, by the grant of an honourable pension, from the prolonged struggle with poverty which makes up so great a part of the story of his life. He had conquered his world; his circumstances were now comparatively easy and his primacy was universally acknowledged. All these facts have left their mark on Boswell's book. We have some trivial and slight memorials of Shakespeare by men who treated him on equal terms of friendship or rivalry. But Johnson, in our conception of him, is always on a pedestal. He is Dr. Johnson; although he was sixty-six years of age when his own University gave him its honorary degree. The fact is that we cannot escape from Boswell, any more than his hero could; and we do not wish to escape, and we do not try. There are many admirers and friends of Johnson who are familiar with every notable utterance recorded by Boswell, who yet would be hard put to it if they were asked to quote a single sentence from *The Rambler*. That splendid repository of wisdom and truth has ceased to attract readers: it has failed and been forgotten in the unequal contest with Boswell. 'It is not sufficiently considered,'