

**A CRITICAL
EXAMINATION OF DR. G.
BIRBECK HILL'S
"JOHNSONIAN" EDITIONS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649430437

A Critical Examination of Dr. G. Birbeck Hill's "Johnsonian" Editions by Percy Fitzgerald

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PERCY FITZGERALD

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OF
DR G. BIRKBECK HILL'S
"JOHNSONIAN" EDITIONS

ISSUED BY THE CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD

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LONDON
BLISS, SANDS & CO.
12 BURLEIGH STREET, STRAND, W.C.

MDCCCXVIII

✓ 16474.11.25

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MINOT FUND
June 13, 1930

PREFACE

NATURALLY I feel some hesitation in putting forward these strictures on Dr Birkbeck Hill's Editions: for has not Mr Leslie Stephen written of "The Life" that "The edition by Dr G. B. Hill is by far the best; the notes throughout are of the highest utility?" ("Dict. Nat. Biog.," vol. xxx. p. 46). And Mr Andrew Lang, has he not declared that, to the same editor we owe "The best edition of *Bozzy*—the most delightful of books—the best 'Collections of Johnsoniana?'" (*Longman's Magazine*, February 1898, p. 374). Yet how reconcile this eulogium with the incredible catalogue of mistakes, misapprehensions, wild flounderings, and speculations, which are here set forth? With such things present there cannot be "by far the best edition," or even a fairly good one. I do not profess to explain the discrepancy, but leave it to the reader to judge for himself.

February 1898.

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EDITING A LA MODE
OR AN EXAMINATION
OF
DR GEORGE BIRKBECK HILL'S
"JOHNSONIAN" EDITIONS

THE PREFACE AND DEDICATION.

SOME ten or eleven years ago, the Clarendon Press took up the project of an issue of Boswell's "Life of Johnson," to be edited by Dr G. Birkbeck Hill, of Pembroke College. No expense or trouble was spared. The work was fifteen months in passing through the Press; *carte blanche* was given to the editor for illustrations, *fac-similes*, etc.; and the six handsome volumes at last emerged from the Press, finely printed, on fine paper, in "roxburgh binding." Here was the long-expected final edition of "Boswell," and the critics expatiated on the research, the labours, and the ingenious "discoveries" of the laborious editor. "A literary monument," said one, "which will stand for ages." "The classical edition, the scholar's Boswell," said another. This, however, was transcended by the burst in the *Daily News*. "Six volumes of solid happiness!" None of these, perhaps, knew exactly what was classical, or what would "stand for ages." Stranger was it that not a single blemish or error was pointed out! Even that accom-

plished and careful critic, Mr Leslie Stephen, was beguiled into giving the high testimonial that he thought it the best edition he knew of.

In the face of these lavish praises, I propose in this book to challenge seriously the editor's claims; to prove that his system is radically wrong, and that his work teems with mistakes, misconceptions, delusions, and with "discoveries" that are purely imaginary. This is a grave indictment, but I think it will be supported. These defects may be owing to a too ardent enthusiasm, inordinate hurry, or, it may be, to an exaggerated confidence in his own powers or knowledge of the subject.

Dr B. Hill, while he professes to execrate the memory of "the inventor of the preface" (whatever he was), himself rather comically furnishes a preface of monumental cast—a perfect unique—the longest perhaps on record, stretching to nearly twenty closely-printed pages. It is mainly about the editor himself: his early life and education, his joys, sorrows, and illnesses, with