

guage than Goldbarth. He observes that the Quechua in Peru have a thousand words for potato—"A thousand! For the new ones/with a skin still as thin as mosquito-wing, for/troll-face ones, for those sneaky burgundy corkscrews/like a devil's dick." Goldbarth envies the Quechua those thousand potato-words, each of which he would employ according to its precise meaning and sonorous sound.

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON.

Vol. I: 1731-1772; Vol. II: 1773-1776; Vol. III: 1777-1781. Edited by Bruce Redford. Princeton. 431 pp.; 385 pp.; 399 pp. \$29.95 each; full set, \$90

The 18th century took particular delight in the familiar letter, and we still read the correspondence of its great practitioners with pleasure. The greatest wit of all, however, is usually not numbered among the epistolary giants. The impression we take of Samuel Johnson from Boswell's *Life* is that of a great talker, not a letter writer—an impression that Johnson himself did much to confirm: "I love to see my friends, to talk to them, and to talk of them; but it is not without a considerable effort of resolution that I prevail upon myself to write."

If we were to read only the letters Johnson wrote until age 59 (which require only half a volume in this new five-volume edition of his letters, three of which are now published), our



impression of Johnson as an *epistolier malgré lui* would be confirmed. His earlier letters were a stopgap measure for conducting business, accepting invitations, and begging favors. But around 1770 Johnson, secure financially and turning aside from strenuous public commitments, discovered a vocation for the form of writing he had earlier dismissed. Especially when writing to his benefactress Hester Thrale, Johnson celebrated matters private and occasional, and he learned to modulate his voice with subtler nuances. Although his earlier letters, even of condolence and sympathy, were full of sententious homily, the later ones express a simplicity and directness of feeling. "The perpetual moralist is present," writes Redford, the editor of the letters, but "he no longer speaks *ex cathedra*."

The purpose of this new edition—which contains 52 "new" letters and corrects errors in previously published ones—is, Redford says, "ultimately to provide the materials for a fresh assessment of Samuel Johnson." The common image of Johnson is that of a jowly, growly English Tory who was, in one description, "the literary embodiment of roast beef and no nonsense." This is hardly the person who wrote cheerfully to Hester Thrale, "I hope to find you gay, and easy, and kind, and I will endeavour to copy you, for what can come of discontent and dolour?" Johnson here comes across as the Christian who tirelessly examines his conscience, the good man who continually performs small kindnesses, a conservative certainly but one neither insular nor jingoistic. This new edition also allows a fresh assessment of Johnson as a practitioner of what he called "the great epistolick art." Far from being an inconsequential, dismissive production, Johnson's letters now seem, along with the *Lives of the Poets*, the great achievement of his literary career in its final phase.

Contemporary Affairs

A CONTINENT OF ISLANDS: Searching for the Caribbean Destiny. By Mark Kurlansky. Addison Wesley. 336 pp. \$22.95

Paradise! That's often how tourists, descending in planeloads, describe a Caribbean island with