

ARTS & LETTERS

A LIFE OF JAMES BOSWELL.

By Peter Martin. Yale Univ. Press.

636 pp. \$35

If Samuel Johnson and James Boswell are looking down on us, they must be amused. Johnson (1709–84) published all of his writings during his lifetime, and critical evaluations of them became a matter of record long ago. His reputation, although buttressed by Boswell's classic biography, has settled into gentle decline. Not so the reputation of Boswell (1740–95). His journals, diaries, notes, letters, and papers began to appear in the 1850s, and new discoveries were made as late as 1939. These writings record severe and incurable depression, alcoholism, gambling, a series of impressive venereal decorations from the sexual wars, the company of illustrious people, and a host of contradictory personalities. With these candid, sometimes poignant, disclosures, Boswell's standing has risen.

Admittedly, it couldn't have fallen much lower. In 1831, Thomas Babington Macaulay described Boswell as "servile and impertinent, shallow and pedantic, a bigot and a sot, bloated with family pride and eternally blustering about the dignity of a born gentleman, yet stooping to being a tale-bearer, an eavesdropper, a common butt in the taverns of London." Martin, a professor of English at Principia College in Illinois, puts in the defense and files a counterclaim. Boswell, he demonstrates, is a writer in a class of his own.

Born in Edinburgh, Boswell obliged his father by becoming a lawyer. He tried a number of death penalty cases and made money, but that did not satisfy his thirst for fame or his conviction that he was born to be great. The idea of greatness drove him to meet renowned men and seek their advice on faith, self-discipline, and life's meaning. He submitted questions to the two great 18th-century Scots, David Hume and Adam Smith. In London, he consulted Samuel Johnson,

Lawrence Sterne, Edward Gibbon, and Edmund Burke. He quizzed Jean-Jacques Rousseau about religion, and later accompanied Rousseau's wife to England, making love to her on the way.

The Boswell of Martin's excellent, comprehensive biography resembles Thomas Mann's picaresque adventurer, Felix Krull. Like Krull, Boswell drew people to him. He believed himself made of finer clay, and people of quality found his presence comforting. A student of the art of flattery, he could make an accomplished man believe himself great.

Like his contemporary Giacomo Casanova, Boswell was a student of the art of seduction as well. His memoirs, in their frankness about his life and loves, resemble Casanova's. The two men were in London simultaneously for a time; perhaps they passed each other on the prowl in St. James Park. But whereas Casanova was broke most of the time and living by his wits, Boswell had money and family standing and paid his own way. What a difference that makes when one wants the company of superior people.

Boswell published his *Life of Johnson* in 1791, seven years after Johnson's death. Boswell himself died four years later, at age 54, worn out, filled with remorse, his youthful hopes having turned to regrets. Yes, he had met people of consequence, but he had been a mere curiosity, incapable of achieving greatness. "There is an imperfection, a superficialness, in all my notions," he wrote. "I understand nothing clearly, nothing to the bottom. I pick up fragments, but never have in my memory a mass of any size." His pensive, self-critical journals brought the recognition that had eluded him in his lifetime. When published in 1950, his *London Journal* sold more than a million copies. Only a person with Boswell's strange mix of good and bad could have written the most interesting diaries ever struck off by the mind of man.

—JACOB A. STEIN



James Boswell