

ety increasingly lacking at the heart at all levels, especially the governmental, the ghost of what was once, at least, a partially civilized society, being succeeded by a mortally maimed society." Hoggart probably sees the present status of Labourism no less than Conservatism as suspect. But behind this hyperbole of doom and gloom one senses that both authors do not really believe that this is the end of Britain as "we" know it. Rather at the core of things is a British exceptionalism, which for want of a better phrase is summed up by two words, "muddling through." Both of these intriguing books will help the reader do just that in trying to make sense of the United Kingdom at the millennium.

Two Takes on Dr. Johnson

MATTHEW M. DAVIS

Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage, by Richard Holmes, *New York: Pantheon Books, 1993. xi + 260 pp.* \$23.00/\$13.00 paper.

Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion, and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism, by J. C. D. Clark, *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xiv + 270 pp.* \$49.95/\$17.95 paper.

IN *DR. JOHNSON AND MR. SAVAGE* Richard Holmes examines the curious friendship that developed between Samuel Johnson and Richard Savage during the late 1730s.

In those days Johnson was an obscure Grub Street journalist. Savage, on the other hand, was a notorious London celebrity. He had published poems, pro-

duced plays, and supplied literary gossip for Pope's *Dunciad*. He was better known, however, for claiming to be the illegitimate son of the Fourth Earl Rivers and Lady Macclesfield. Lady Macclesfield denied this claim, but Savage told anyone who would listen that she had abandoned and persecuted him. He even wrote poems about his supposed plight:

*Why do I breathe? What joy can Being
give?
When she, who gave me Life, forgets I
live!*

Savage was also notorious for having killed a man in a tavern brawl. He pleaded self-defense, but a jury found him guilty of murder and sentenced him to hang. He was only saved when a patron, Lord Tyrconnel, obtained a royal pardon and took him into his household. After his release Savage enjoyed a brief period of celebrity. For some time "his presence was sufficient to make any place of publick entertainment popular, and his approbation and example constituted the fashion." Unfortunately, Savage soon proved himself an ingrate. He kept late hours, raided Tyrconnel's wine cellar, and addressed his patron as "Right Honorable Brute and Booby." Tyrconnel turned Savage out, and the feckless poet spent the rest of the 1730s drifting from place to place, living on charity, and drinking heavily.

Johnson and Savage met during this period of decline, probably in 1738. The two down-and-out writers spent whole nights together, wandering the streets and criticizing the Walpole administration. Their friendship was intense, but it did not last long. Savage left London in 1739 and died in a Bristol debtors' prison in 1743. In 1744, Johnson published his deeply conflicted *Life of Savage*.

Richard Holmes has produced an uneven account of Johnson's friendship with Savage. Holmes writes simple, read-

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able prose and includes a delightful account of Savage's trial, but he relies much too heavily on psychological speculation. At one point, he guesses that Johnson was sexually attracted to Savage. Elsewhere he declares that "Johnson had submerged his own sexual feelings into Savage's fantasies about his mother." Such interpretations look clumsy and unconvincing when compared to Walter Jackson Bate's efforts in the same vein.

Holmes also presents a one-sided reading of Johnson's *Life of Savage*. Although he admits that Johnson vacillated between "the love of the friend and the judgment of the biographer," Holmes focuses on Johnson's love and pays little attention to his judgment. According to Holmes, Johnson was "blinded by self-identification with Savage." As a result, his biography is "misleading," full of "prevarications," and "close to a whitewashing of Savage."

It is true that Johnson accepts Savage's dubious paternity claims and Savage's version of the fatal tavern brawl. Johnson also argues that Savage's misfortunes "were often the consequences of the crimes of others." At several points he comes dangerously close to complete identification with Savage, but he always pulls back from the edge. He recognizes that Savage could be arrogant, inconsiderate, ungrateful, petulant, ill-tempered, negligent, obstinate, vengeful, fickle, contemptuous, hypocritical, and imprudent. He was "often blameable." In some cases, "his conduct cannot be vindicated." His "weaknesses were indeed very numerous." He was the "slave of every passion." It was "always dangerous to trust him." He "input[ed] none of his miseries to himself" and "was never made wiser by his sufferings." He proved that "negligence and irregularity long continued will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible." Clearly this is no "whitewashing."

Johnson empathizes with Savage, and he defends his friend whenever he can, but he does not allow empathy to completely stifle judgment.

Holmes uses his focus on empathy to reach several dubious conclusions. He argues that empathy is the "central tenet" of both biography and Romanticism; therefore, biography is "essentially a Romantic form." Since Johnson "first crystallised" the "perils and...possibilities" of this Romantic form, he "heralds the coming of the Romantic generation" and is "almost our contemporary."

These are problematic assertions. If empathy is essential to biography, how can we explain hostile lives such as Johnson's *Life of Swift*? If Johnson was the first to show biography's potential, where does that leave Plutarch, Suetonius, and Isaac Walton? And if Johnson was a precursor of Romanticism, why did he frown on the proto-Romantic poetry of his day?

When Holmes announces that Johnson is "almost our contemporary," I am reminded of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Kott looked at Shakespeare and saw a writer as relentlessly gloomy as himself; indeed, he reduced Shakespeare to a blurry image of himself. I do not say that Holmes is as reductive as Kott, but when a romantic biographer looks at Samuel Johnson and sees a romantic biographer we may wonder if he is not reading some of his own opinions into his subject.

One scholar who would disagree with Holmes's notion that Johnson is "our contemporary" is J. C. D. Clark. In his latest book, the controversial historian argues that "the life of Samuel Johnson, like much else about the eighteenth century, is further from us than it first appears." Clark maintains that Johnson's politics, and eighteenth-century politics in general, have been misunderstood. He insists that Johnson was not only a Tory, but also a Jacobite and a Nonjuror,

that is, a man who believed that James Stuart was unjustly deposed in 1688 and who therefore declined to swear allegiance to the Hanoverian kings who ruled England during his lifetime.

Boswell touched on this subject years ago. He admitted that Johnson had “a kind of liking for Jacobitism” but thought that Johnson was “not properly a Jacobite.” The eminent Johnson scholar Donald Greene has insisted for many years that Boswell overstated Johnson’s “liking for Jacobitism.” Clark claims that exactly the opposite is true. He thinks Boswell “failed to appreciate the full extent of Johnson’s...commitment to the Stuart cause.”

Clark’s difficult and annoyingly digressive argument can be summarized as follows: Johnson was raised in a town with a Jacobite reputation by a father who “retained his attachment to the unfortunate house of Stuart.” He received a classical education at Oxford, which many felt was a Jacobite hotbed. He called his tutor “a fine Jacobitical fellow” and seems to have left Oxford without taking loyalty oaths. Indeed, Johnson may have avoided such oaths throughout his life. At age sixty he told Boswell, “To oblige people to take oaths as to the disputed right is wrong. I know not whether I could take them.”

As a young man Johnson was friendly with several Jacobite sympathizers, including Richard Savage. In 1739 he published a suspicious political pamphlet titled *Marmor Norfolciense*. Boswell noted that this pamphlet exhibited “warm AntiHanoverian zeal.” Johnson evidently went into hiding after *Marmor* appeared. His whereabouts during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 are also sketchy. Clark thinks Johnson may have “held himself in readiness” as Bonnie Prince Charlie advanced.

As an adult, Johnson “roared with prodigious violence” against George II and spoke of the ’45 rebellion as “a noble

attempt.” He attended a church that had many Jacobite members and added many quotations from Nonjurors to revised editions of his *Dictionary*. In 1762, when he accepted his pension, critics complained that his “political principles” made him “an unfit object” of royal favor. Johnson, they said, had “very little claim to the favour of any of the descendants of the house of Hanover.” He was a “hypocrite” for accepting money from a king whose legal title he “would lately scarce have owned.” Boswell asked Johnson about these charges and recorded his answer:

now that I have this pension, I am the same man in every respect that I have ever been; I retain the same principles. It is true, that I cannot now curse (smiling) the House of Hanover; nor would it be decent for me to drink King James’s health in the wine that King George gives me money to pay for. But, Sir, I think that the pleasure of cursing the House of Hanover, and drinking King James’s health, are amply overbalanced by three hundred pounds a year.

During the 1770s Johnson’s critics called him a man “of known Jacobitical principles” and “a professed Jacobite.” Johnson fueled the fire by arguing in conversation that most Englishmen wished to “restore the King who certainly has the hereditary right.” As late as 1779 he reportedly identified himself with the Jacobite cause: “we have not relinquished our principles, we think the right to be, where we always thought it; various circumstances induce us to an acquiescence in what is, without abandoning our opinions of what ought to be.”

Clark’s case is strong enough to call into question Donald Greene’s assertion that “there is no evidence whatever that Johnson was a Jacobite,” but it is not strong enough to establish that Johnson was in fact a Jacobite; it is an intriguing and suggestive argument but not a conclusive one.

Much of Clark's evidence is either dubious or circumstantial. There probably were Jacobites in Lichfield, at Oxford, and in Johnson's church, but none of this proves anything about Johnson's own views. Nor can the politics of the father be imputed to the son. Johnson may have left Oxford simply because he ran out of money and not because he was unwilling to take oaths. Likewise, he may have opposed oaths on general principle, rather than for specific political reasons. Those who called Johnson a Jacobite during the 1770s may have been utilizing smear tactics: as Greene has noted, not everyone who was called a "communist" during the 1950s deserved the epithet. It is also dangerous to rely too heavily on Johnson's conversational remarks, for he often "talked for victory" instead of urging "his real and decided opinion."

Clark is correct when he states that Johnson's education was "overwhelmingly classical," but he steps on thin ice when he suggests that such an education was "politically significant" and increased one's chances of turning Jacobite. In Johnson's day, gentlemen of *all* parties were classically educated. As Johnson himself explained, "classical quotation is the *parole* of literary men all over the world." It is therefore not a reliable indicator of political tendencies.

Other questions remain: If Johnson was a Jacobite, why did he write that the English were "impelled" by "the necessity of self-preservation" to drive James

Stuart from the throne? If he supported the '45, why did he call it "a rebellion ...which, through the favour of Providence, was crushed at once"? If he was a Nonjuror, why did he say that he "never knew a Nonjuror who could reason"? If he upheld the hereditary right of the Stuarts, why did he encourage students to read "Locke on government"? Until these and other questions are answered, I am afraid the world must continue to "vibrate in a state of uncertainty" as to the truth of Johnson's political views.¹

These two books present strikingly different views of Johnson. Holmes says Johnson is "almost our contemporary"; Clark says he is "further from us than it first appears." Holmes uses psychological and emotional analysis to suggest that Johnson's early works look forward to Romanticism; Clark uses political and historical data to argue that those same works look back to the Stuart dynasty. Even the weaknesses of these two critics are antithetical: Holmes pulls Johnson so far forward in time that we lose sight of his strangeness; Clark pushes him so far back into the past that we lose our sense of his relevance. Clark's argument is much stronger than Holmes's, but neither critic delivers a balanced, comprehensive, and satisfying portrait of Samuel Johnson.

1. Readers wishing to learn more about the debate over Johnson's politics should consult *The Age of Johnson*, Vol. 7 (1995), which contains briefs for both sides.