

DR. JOHNSON AND MISS HILL BOOTHBY

SOME fourteen years after Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was given to the world there appeared a small collection of Letters addressed to Dr. Johnson which had found no place in the great Biography. These were contained in a slim volume published in London in 1805 and bearing the title *Original Letters to Dr. Johnson by Miss Hill Boothby*. The little work has never once been re-printed, although some few extracts from it are to be met with in the notes to Dr. Birkbeck Hill's edition of *Johnson's Letters*, and it has occasionally been referred to by other commentators. A copy of this now exceedingly rare book lies before us as we write, and suggests to us to set down something about one of the most singular of Dr. Johnson's many friendships.

When Johnson was a very young man, poverty-stricken and unknown, he paid the first of many visits to his friend, the Rev. Dr. Taylor, of Ashbourne, in Derbyshire. There, we are told, 'the daughters of some of the Derbyshire squires showed their good taste and good sense by desiring the company of the young genius, poor and unpolished as he was.' Or, as Miss Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield,' most appalling of poetesses, and a life-long enemy of Johnson, preferred in her acid and waspish way to put it, 'They probably amused themselves with the uncouth adorations of the learned though dirty stripling, whose mean appearance was overlooked, because of the genius and knowledge that blazed through him, albeit with umbered flames owing to his spleen and melancholy.' One of these acquaintances was a Miss Meynell, and another, her friend Miss Hill Boothby, both (we are assured) not inferior 'in point of rank and education, elegance and accomplishments' to those with whom Johnson

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was to associate later on in the days of his celebrity. The former of these ladies Johnson considered to have the best understanding he had ever met with in any human being. The latter was sister to Sir Brooke Boothby, a Baronet of ancient creation, and was somewhat of a Blue-stocking. She had great ability, read her Bible in Hebrew, and had compiled a grammar in that language, 'written out in a character eminently beautiful.' Johnson was captivated by her learning, the purity of her mind, and the grace of her manner, although (wrote Mrs. Thrale long afterwards) he thought she pushed her piety to bigotry and her devotion to enthusiasm, and disqualified herself for the duties of this life by her perpetual aspirations after the next.

As the years went on, the acquaintance thus made was doubtless continued and improved upon in various places and under differing circumstances until, in the case of Miss Boothby, it ripened into an ardent friendship which gave interest to the last three years of her life. Her epistolary intercourse with Johnson 'dates from the year 1753. She was then living at Tissington Hall, near Ashbourne, with a Mr. Fitzherbert, a distant kinsman, and taking charge of his six motherless children. Fitzherbert had married her former friend, Miss Meynell, who had recently died, said the Gentleman's Magazine (in an article most probably written by Johnson himself) 'in the flower of her age, distinguished for her piety and fine accomplishments.' Her virtues had been almost oppressive, the Doctor told Mrs. Thrale, so that her husband felt at once afflicted and released! One of the six orphaned children became, by the way, one of our most famous Ambassadors to Spain and Russia.

Johnson went on a visit to Tissington, and (as the charitable Miss Seward puts it) 'the fair and learned devotee, in the wane of her youth, a woman of family

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and genteel fortune, encouraged him to resume his Platonisms.' The once celebrated Lichfield poetess, whose hatred of Johnson extended itself to his friends, then goes on to describe poor Miss Boothby as 'Johnson's spiritualized mistress,' and as a 'sublimated Methodist.' As a consequence of this visit, and the impetus thus given to their friendship, Miss Hill Boothby and Dr. Johnson began their correspondence, which continued until the former's death in 1756.

Six only of Johnson's letters have come down to us, but probably there were many more, for thirty-two of Hill Boothby's were preserved. Johnson once informed Dr. Taylor, 'I exchanged letters *regularly* with dear Boothby.' These published epistles are not among his best efforts in this line, even Boswell confessed 'their excellence is not apparent.' They were all written when Johnson was depressed by a severe illness and when his correspondent was slowly dying. Dr. Birkbeck Hill considers them couched in an unnatural strain, and that Johnson affected in them a style which would have better become a spiritual novel. Miss Boothby is usually addressed as 'Honoured Madam,' but now and then as 'Dearest, dearest Madam,' 'My dearest,' and 'Sweet Angel,' and he assures her that there is 'none other on whom his heart reposes.' He describes himself as a poor helpless being, reduced, by a blast of mind, to weakness and misery. He is convinced of the 'fallaciousness of hope and the uncertainty of schemes,' begs her prayers, is always glad to be instructed by her, reads carefully the improving book she sends him (apparently Law's *Appeal to all that Doubt*), but declines to be entirely influenced by her in spiritual matters, or to take his religion from any human hand. Always a great dabbler in physics, he prescribes for his correspondent balsams, syrups, and bark, recommends hot red port wine, and goes into details in a way which somewhat

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offends modern delicacy but was perfectly in accord with eighteenth-century notions of refinement. Some few phrases in his letters deserve to live—*e.g.*, ‘Few are so busy as not to find time to do what they delight in doing.’

Hill Boothby's own letters to Johnson were all carefully preserved by him; he numbered them, dated them, and had them bound in one volume. They were probably saved by his black servant, Francis Barber, from the flames into which the Doctor shortly before his death consigned a great mass of his papers, and came (apparently by purchase from the negro's widow) into the possession of Richard Wright, a Staffordshire surgeon, who edited and published them, and exhibited the originals in the ‘Lichfield Museum of Antiquities and Natural and Artificial Curiosities,’ of which he was the Proprietor. Here they were at all times ‘open to the inspection of the Publick,’ and Mr. Wright considered that to say they ‘did credit to the understanding of the Lady who wrote them was but faint praise.’ He added, ‘They betray no family secrets, but contain reflections upon serious and literary subjects, and display with what benevolent ardour Dr. Johnson valued Miss Boothby's friendship.’

By 1753, Johnson, although by no means the famous man he was soon to become, had obtained a certain celebrity as the writer of the *Vanity of Human Wishes*, *Irene*, and *The Rambler*. His honorary degrees, his royal pension and his literary dictatorship were already foreshadowed. He was then living in the still existing house in Gough Square, Fleet Street, engrossed in the preparation of the great *Dictionary of the English Language*. Regarded with some awe as a scholar, a moralist, and a man of definitely orthodox principles, Miss Hill Boothby desired him to be very much more. The fair Methodist (not that she called herself such) aimed at his ‘Conversion’ in the full evangelical

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sense. She was one of a long line of devotees who marked him down as their quarry. Hannah More was another of these enthusiasts, and Cowper was a third. 'Dr. Johnson's conversion,' the Poet said, 'would indeed be a proof of the omnipotence of grace.'

Hill Boothby's first letter to Johnson shows some degree of nervousness, but she soon got over this. She begs her friend to tell her her faults and help her to rectify them. She refers to the forthcoming Dictionary, and is impatient for its publication, when the whole nation will join in his applause, for he will have put into their hands the means of speaking the English language with purity and propriety. She urges him to devote all his studies and labours more to the glory of God. He has finely and forcibly proved to others the Vanity of Human Wishes, but he himself should seek after divine and eternal goods. And she would like to see his pen wholly employed in the glorious Christian cause, and asks him ever exclusively to choose the subject of Religion for his writings.

In other letters, she speaks of her own tender, weak body, low and languid, her trembling hand, and her approaching dissolution. She does not complain, however, of the dispositions of Providence, nor quarrel with medicinal draughts because they are bitter. Yet she is sometimes sorely perplexed at her lot, and thinks such a friend as Johnson may be a comfort to her, and a great one. Yet, after all, only Divine consolation can give her wounds the needed balm. She warns Johnson against his own fruitless griefs, and bids him, too, seek a remedy in Religion.

Writing from 'The Bath,' to which city she had gone to drink the waters, she says that no nervous fine lady there can more frequently have recourse to her doctor for advice than she to Johnson in every point of conduct. The dissipation of the Assembly, the music room, and the Ball do not appeal to her, she

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puts aside Mr. Richardson's Novels—'no honey in them for me.' Only the lexicographer's letters are pure sterling gold for her amid the tinsel base-mixed stuff she meets with. As to her fox-hunting relatives, she regards them with pity as animals little superior to those they pursue. Apparently Johnson took exception to this last remark. For he was fond of riding, and rode well, and would (so says Mrs. Thrale) follow the hounds for fifty miles on end. Besides, he had once recommended Hunting to a Bishop on the ground that 'man feels his own vacuity less in action than when at rest.'

Having visited London, Hill Boothby declared she cannot share her friend's enthusiasm for the 'full tide of human existence.' Of those she met there, she delighted only in him. His talk is to her the medicine of life, yet she would rather hear it in Dovedale than in Cavendish Square. Turtle feasts and theatres fill her with compassion for those who go to them. But she does not refuse to read *Irene* when Johnson sends it to her, though 'you are the only author in England who could make a play an acceptable present to me.'

In almost her last letter, she speaks of the great *Dictionary*, now at last published, as placed on a desk in full view in her own room. She has her friend's 'Conversion' at heart to the end, and hopes he may yet 'come to think as she does.' Johnson, as we have seen from his own letters, was too honest to give her the assurances for which she so craved, but to the very last she was his 'Angel' and his 'Monitress.' Had she lived some years longer, the famous Baretti once declared, she would have surely had her way, and have made of Johnson a religious 'enthusiast' like herself. He forgot the Doctor's well-known saying that his 'obstinate rationality' would always prevail over his fears when it came to the question of a change of religion.

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A curious side-light is thrown on Hill Boothby by Richard Graves in his *Spiritual Quixote*, one of the most remarkable and readable of the pioneer novels of the eighteenth century. In this celebrated volume, first published in 1772, and written very much on the lines of Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*, the author undertook to 'ridicule the intrusion of the laity into spiritual functions,' and to attack the 'enthusiasm of the Methodists.' The rambles of the hero of the book bring him to Tissington, the home of the Fitzherberts, who are disguised under the name of Sir William and Lady Forester. Hill Boothby, who is with them, figures as Miss Sainthill. Both the ladies are very religiously disposed, Lady Forester being a little inclined to 'the mystic or seraphic theology,' and an admirer of Fénelon, while Miss Sainthill is described as a very sensible maiden lady, 'fond of a long pinch of snuff,' who took the part of the Methodists with great spirit, and said she would like to found a Protestant nunnery where a lady of good family and small fortune could find a happy refuge from the impertinence of the fools and coxcombs with which the world abounds. She seemed able to quote chapter and verse as well as the best divine in Christendom, but 'her leading characteristics were extreme good temper, and a happy disposition to enjoy under proper restrictions all the gifts of Providence.' The Miss Sainthill of the novel, it need hardly be said, is a picture of the Hill Boothby of Johnson's youth, not of the Hill Boothby of the Letters.

Miss Boothby died on January 16th, 1756. Johnson was at first almost distracted with grief at her loss. But when calm had come to him, he set himself to write the beautiful petition which is assigned in his *Prayers and Meditations* to the date of her death, and thanked God for the graces which his knowledge of her life and his sense of her departure had brought

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him. He then made a commendation of her soul. And never did he cease to remember her during the remainder of his long life. A quarter of a century later, he could write, 'Dear Boothby is at my heart still.' And when each Easter Morn he made his customary Communion in the Church of St. Clement Danes, his ardent and elaborate preparation included prayers for his much-loved dead—his relations, his wife, and Hill Boothby.

ROBERT BRACEY, O.P.

THE STOP-GAP

(To one temporarily lapsed—for whom please pray.)

THOUGH desecrated, yet not prayerless lies
The altar of your soul. Your cry of need,
Although your lips be dumb, from mine shall rise:
My tears within your tearless eyes shall plead.
I praise in you the God Whom you despise.

I hide within your heart, nor will molest
Your mirthless revels or unrestful sleep.
I keep guard for the Master dispossessed,
So haply from your thriftless hands to keep
Some of the treasures that He loved the best.

Shall He not hear when from your heart I cry?
But when He comes, unworthy of that day—
The robe, the ring, the feasting—then shall I,
Kissing your threshold, make no longer stay;
And you will never know the stowaway,
Your heart's unbidden guest of days gone by.

M.B.