An Apology for Boswell

YOUNG BOSWELL: CHAPTERS ON JAMES BOSWELL, THE BIOGRAPHER, BASED LARGELY ON NEW MATERIAL. By Chauncey Brewster Tinker. Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

MR. TINKER, known as a well-equipped Johnsonian, has undertaken to do two things. In the first place he has proposed to make an entaining book about the biographer of Johnson. Secondly, he has aimed to prove that the writer of the greatest biography in the English, perhaps in any, language did not accomplish this by virtue of being a mere toady and simpleton, but by native genius. In the first of these tasks we may say in few words that Mr. Tinker has been eminently successful. If he had in mind the Byronic maxim, "I won't be tedious and I will be read," he has made the boast good. There is not a dull page from cover to cover. This is partly owing to the large amount of new material which he has drawn from Mr. R. B. Adams's marvelous collection of Johnsoniana and from other sources. But still more his success must be attributed to his own fine sense of literary values, his flair for what is at once characteristic and amusing, his judicious comments on the foibles and generosities of human nature, with both of which qualities his hero was abundantly endowed. Only occasionally, very rarely indeed, does his manifest determination to be entertaining betray him into the cheaper kind of sprightliness, which is the pit digged for the unwary scholar who runs from pedantry.

In the second of his intentions Mr. Tinker has, perhaps, not come off quite so victoriously. Everyone is familiar with Macaulay's famous portrait of Boswell as "a coxcomb, and a bore, weak, vain, pushing, curious, garrulous," as a man with "no wit, no humor, no eloquence." It used to be fashionable to ask how a mere fool and bore could have written one of the wisest and most interesting books in the world; and if that paradox, in its crudest, Macaulayesque form, has been exploded for some time, it has still remained a problem to explain how this same Scotch laird, so weak and so unwise as he certainly appears in some aspects of his own life, was the father of the triumphantly magnificent Life. In part Mr. Tinker has solved this problem. He recognizes Boswell's vanity, his moral looseness, his restlessness. But he brings out more clearly than had been done before the strength of purpose that ran through and under the man's weakness, the genuine admiration for things true and noble that accompanied

his vanity. Above all he shows that the Life of Johnson was no accident, but that from early youth Boswell was training himself for his great task by braving any difficulties in the pursuit of famous personages (and that in no mean spirit of sycophancy), by his persistence in taking notes, by his adaptability to all sorts of conditions, his penetrating glance into human nature which enabled him to bring to the surface what was most characteristic in each man he met. If one wishes to see these traits exemplified, one need only read Boswell's correspondence with and about two such divergent creatures as Rousseau and John Wilkes. There is undoubtedly something resembling genius in all this, and it goes far to explain the notable qualities of the Life. But does it explain all? Mr. Tinker would seem to think so; we are not entirely convinced.

Boswell at different times had in mind to write, and actually gathered material for writing, various other biographical works besides the one which has given him immortality. In some degree he even carried out such a project in regard to the Sicilian Paoli. No doubt he would have succeeded respectably in any of those plans; but it seems to us perfectly clear also from the evidence that his success would have been respectable and no more. His notes and his completed work on Sicily display marked talent and indicate his natural disposition and training for minute portraiture; but of downright genius, of greatness of conception, they show nothing, or only hints. The simple truth is that in his one masterly achievement Boswell in a measure merely held the pen, while Johnson himself is the true father and begetter of the Life. It is not only that the interest is mainly due to the character and words of the man who is so diligently boswellized. If the recorder had merely transcribed with patience and literary adroitness the doings and sayings of Johnson, we should have had a good, even a memorable, book, but not the supreme work of genius we do actually possess. There is more here than literary cleverness. There is the unique psychological phenomenon—unique unless something like it occurred in the case of Socrates and Plato—that in some mysterious manner the genius and personality of Johnson were transfused into the very soul of the recorder. The biography is not a conjunction of great things reported faithfully with the comments and framework of a mediocre mind. There is one spirit infused throughout the whole, and that spirit is more Johnson's than Boswell's. This, we take it, is a mystery which can be felt and stated, but which defies the scalpel of critical ingenuity. Mr. Tinker has, we think, brought this fact into clearer light by his accumulation of documents and by his analysis of Boswell's traits and talents; but we doubt if this was quite the intention of his apology for the man whom Macaulay defamed.

PAUL ELMER MORE