

TO PARIS WITH DR. JOHNSON†

IT may be truly said that many years before Dr. Johnson's death, he had obtained the universal respect of his fellow-countrymen. And this esteem continued for at least a generation after he had passed away, for had not the genius of his great biographer 'Johnsonized the land'? However, later on there came a time, and one that lasted long, when his fame suffered an eclipse, and that almost total. Romanticism and a new Liberalism were now sovereign; Byron and Scott, Wordsworth and Shelley, these were men's gods; there was no place for the sturdy commonsense of Johnson. But to-day this movement has more or less run its course, and by an inevitable reaction Dr. Johnson has come into his own again. There is a general revival of interest in him, his circle, and his period, and that not only in England, but very markedly in America also. Societies are founded to study his works and his opinions. New editions of Johnson and Boswell, with careful and meticulous commentaries and annotations, issue from the press. Every detail is scanned, every morsel of interest is brought to light. Collections of letters and sayings are published. Essays are written, meetings are held, speeches are delivered, literary repositories are ransacked, manuscripts are unearthed and collated, and transatlantic millionaires bear down upon our auction-rooms and at incredible cost secure rich Johnsonian prizes.

It is not long since a great chest of Boswell's papers, for generations supposed to have been destroyed, was found in the strong-room of an Irish castle, and its contents secured at great price by a wealthy citizen of the United States, to be subsequently edited and printed for him in a superb

†*The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Dr. Johnson.* Edited from the original MSS. by Moses Tyson, M.A., Ph.D., and Henry Guppy, M.A., Litt.D. (Manchester University Press, 1932; 15/- net.)

form regardless of all expense. And hardly a year has passed since the John Ryland Library in Manchester acquired another Johnsonian collection of enormous extent, hidden away and almost forgotten in an old Welsh manor-house. 'This last hoard,' as our chief literary review expresses it, 'breaks all records.' It consists of a vast treasure of manuscripts, journals, dialogues, note-books, memoranda, and biographical matter, once the property and mainly the handiwork of Mrs. Thrale, Johnson's friend of friends, the gracious lady 'whose kindness soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched.' The Trustees of the Ryland Library have already printed parts of their extensive purchase, notably a volume of unpublished letters to and from Johnson. And now they give us as a further instalment something the very existence of which was quite unsuspected—a full and graphic *Journal* kept by Mrs. Thrale during her well-known visit to Paris with Dr. Johnson, containing much new information and highly characteristic of its clever and lively author.

Readers of Boswell will remember how Dr. Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Thrale and their daughter, and the celebrated Joseph Baretti, then Italian tutor to Queeney Thrale and invaluable as guide and courier, set off for France on September 15th, 1775, remaining there until the eleventh of the following November. Johnson kept a Diary of this tour in three little note-books, the first and third of which were lost, but the second survived and was included by Boswell in the *Life*. This diary (the manuscript is preserved in the British Museum) was just a skeleton, a few notes and jottings, made doubtless with a view to expansion later on, the germ of a book destined never to be written. Disappointing as it is, however, the fragment has been elaborately commented upon, every person or book mentioned in it identified, every fact verified or expanded.

Mrs. Thrale's *Journal* was much more ample and much more finished. It might well have been published as it stood, and it covers the entire period of the Tour. Those who have read the large volumes of her *Travels*, issued in

1789, will recognise here the same liveliness of style, the same wit and humour, the same tolerance and largeness of view, the same unquenchable enthusiasm, the same irrepressible interest in everything human. In Paris she covered much the same ground as did Horace Walpole's friend Cole the antiquary, whose interesting journals have been recently published, but whereas Cole was mainly interested in Things, Mrs. Thrale cared almost entirely for Persons. What she has written enormously elucidates and amplifies Johnson's briefer narrative, but it must be conceded that she was certainly no Boswell. Her record of the Doctor's conversations is sadly slight, and she herself and not Dr. Johnson is, not unnaturally, ever the centre of the stage.

To us the great interest of the book lies in its frequent glimpses of the English Religious Houses abroad. This is something hardly touched upon by other travellers. Indeed, one could not expect it to be. It would not occur to the average Protestant to visit such establishments even could he gain admission, and as to contemporary English Catholics they were (as a consequence of living under the penal laws) far too timid and retiring to say much about these cloistered homes of their exiled relatives. But both Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale were genuinely interested in everything and everybody ecclesiastical and monastic, and they had many Catholic friends who furnished them with introductions giving them the necessary entrée. Moreover, Mrs. Thrale's chief friend in Paris was an influential English Catholic, Mrs. Strickland, of Sizergh Castle in Westmoreland ('a very high lady, Sir,' said Johnson), who had herself been brought up in one of the English convents abroad, was related to many of their inmates, Howards, Staffords, Talbots, Towneleys and the rest, knew everybody, could go anywhere, and was able to explain everything. The result is that Mrs. Thrale's Journal gives a truthful picture, partly edifying, partly the contrary, of institutions that have either long passed away or have been transplanted and survive only in a very altered form.

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On landing at Calais, the party put up at Dessein's Hotel, and there soon came to them there (as to all other travellers of the period) a begging Capuchin making the 'quest' for his convent. They not only gave him a louis d'or (in return for which he made Queeney Thrale a present of a tooth-pick case), but also asked him to dinner. Afterwards he took them to his friary, and gave them a sight of the cells, chapel, and refectory. But the library was locked, and 'I was not sorry,' says Mrs. Thrale, 'for Mr. Johnson would never have come out of it.' This Capuchin had been a soldier, and had travelled through Europe and Asia, he could read Addison's *Spectator* and Rapin's English History, and he played the fiddle. Johnson was quite taken with him, and thought him 'as complete a character as could be met in romance.'

Next morning they went to the great Church of Notre Dame. There Mrs. Thrale busied herself counting the side-altars, and viewing the magnificence of the building. But Dr. Johnson (though she does not say so: we know it from another source) was otherwise occupied. He was on his knees in prayer, asking for calm of mind, repentance of time mis-spent, and strength to keep his resolutions. From the church, they proceeded to a convent of Dominican Nuns. There was an English Prioress there, a relative of the Greys of Howick. She chatted with them at the grille, and had been 'immured' twenty-six years. She possessed the 'elegant figure and the manners and look of a woman of high fashion.' She wore a brilliant ring, and carried a fine inlaid snuff-box.

At St. Omer, besides visiting the Cathedral and other churches, they went over the English College. Had they but come two years earlier, Johnson might have spoken with the then President, the venerable Alban Butler. But that great glory of English Catholicism had died in 1773. They were astonished at the size and completeness of the building, the Theatre was 'much finer than that at Bright-helmstone.'

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While at Arras, they viewed many more churches, and went over a newly built Benedictine Abbey. The Refectory or Hall (probably this is Dr. Johnson's observation) was little less spacious than that of Christ Church, Oxford, and the Library in size and arrangement resembled that of All Souls. While Dr. Johnson was looking at the books, Mrs. Thrale's insatiable curiosity seems to have got her into trouble. She was half up the stairs, when an old monk 'reproved me somewhat roughly, and told me their dormitory was no place for Ladies.' Henceforth she included in her memories of Arras not only wayside crucifixes and devotees in long cloaks but also 'peevisish Benedictines.'

Arrived at Rouen, the travellers made a considerable stay, and Mrs. Thrale saw the inside of two Religious Houses of strangely differing character. The first, that of the Poor Clares, was of marked austerity. The Nuns were English and all spoke with a strong North of England burr. Their habit was coarse, and they were barefooted. They were forty-three in number. The Superior was a Vavasour, and there were three other members of that family in the Order. They gave the visitors artificial flowers of their own making. They were 'all dismal objects,' emaciated and cold, with fingers knotted at the joints, and nails broken and disfigured. They seemed 'resolved on misery.'

By way of contrast, the other convent was a great French Benedictine Abbey of the highest rank, with an Abbess nominated by the King. There Mrs. Thrale and Mrs. Strickland were shown the refectory, cells, garden, and all the 'curiosities' of the place. The nuns wore habits of light black stuff with cuffs of fine cambric, they changed their linen every day and were most delicately clean, and with their hands there was evidently nothing wrong. And the table-cloths were of good diaper and the forks and cups of silver. The Lady Abbess had an elegant apartment, and was 'a mighty pleasing woman.' She could talk of literature, politics, fashion, everything. Her nuns had lap-dogs, cats, and parrots, and she herself possessed a great English mastiff. She gave her guests cakes of the nuns' own mak-

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ing, and Mrs. Thrale presented her in return with a copy of Johnson's *Rasselas*. 'But may I read it?' says she. 'Vestals might read it, Madame,' replied I.' Later on, at a House of Benedictine Fathers, Dr. Johnson rejoined them. In the Library there, where he tore the heart out of several books, he met an Abbé, with whom he talked in fluent Latin, wholly at his ease. He first loudly condemned the recent suppression of the Jesuits, and then pronounced an ardent eulogium upon Milton, 'truly sublime.' The priest was so lost in wonder and delight, that he rose from his seat and embraced the speaker.

When at last the party reached Paris, they devoted themselves to sight-seeing, went to Court and mixed a little in French society, saw the King and Queen hunting or dining in public, and the like. But they still concentrated mostly on churches and convents, and frequently entertained priests, English and French, to dinner. Prior Cowley, Fathers Wilson and Wilkes, and other Benedictines were constantly with them. One day Mrs. Thrale drove to the English Convent of the Blue Nuns, where 'several women of quality were immured.' At another time, together with Dr. Johnson she visited the Austin Nuns, also English. The Abbess was a Fermor, niece of Pope's Belinda. She had a great deal to say about the poet and his troublesome caprices, his habit of dozing all day and writing verses all night while keeping the servants up to make coffee for him. Mrs. Thrale stayed on by herself to dine with the nuns on beef and carrots, mutton and spinach. She quite lost her heart to these sisters, so caressive was their manner, so much did they inspire 'at once compassion and respect.' But this 'mighty delightful' day had its end at last, and Dr. Johnson came in a coach and fetched her away.

On another occasion the English Benedictine Monks of St. Edmund's entertained to dinner the entire party. Johnson was for ever in and out of their Library, and went by himself to visit the Doctors of the Sorbonne, the Fathers of the Oratory, and the Chartreuse. He was particularly

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enchanted with this last, which held twenty-four monks, each with his three rooms and garden. They gave him grapes and showed him their books. The Doctor also one Sunday attended a sermon at St. Sulpice, and heard the children catechised. He went on to the Canons Regular of St. Germain, and saw their library, a noble collection arranged in presses projecting from the wall 'like those at Oxford.' He dined once again at St. Edmund's; it was a maigre day, and the fare fried fish, herrings and eels, with sauce and lentils. From these Fathers 'I parted very tenderly.' Our travellers would indeed seem to have devoted quite a third of their time in Paris to convents and religious friends, the picture-galleries and the opera being almost entirely thrust into the background. They did their best to live up to the spirit of Johnson's oft-quoted dictum 'I never read of a monastery, but I could fall on my knees to kiss the pavement.'

On the return journey, they put in a day at St. Denis, and not only surveyed the Cathedral, but late in the evening visited the Carmes and heard the Nuns sing in choir. One of the voices must have been that of Madame Louise de France, the saintly daughter of Louis XV, who had taken the veil there five years before.

At Cambrai, yet another Convent of English Nuns was viewed by this tireless party. One of the Sisters, a Sheldon of Warwickshire, introduced them to the Benedictine Confessor, Father Welch, whom they bore off with them to supper at their inn. He was dark and handsome, with a fresh colour, and six foot high. 'But,' says Mrs. Thrale (and it is really very obliging of her, if a little invidious) 'I have never seen an ill-looking man in a Religious Habit—I mean Monks and Friars, for the Abbés one meets are poor figures enough for the most part.'

At Douai, Dr. Johnson hastened to call on the English Benedictine Fathers as soon as he arrived, and next morning they all went to St. Peter's Church, to gaze on the Parlement of Flanders attending Mass in state, with a guard of soldiers, and an orchestra of fiddles and bassoons.

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More English Nunneries, Benedictines and Poor Clares, were seen at Dunkirk. Then they finished up at Calais, once more visiting the Dominican Sisters, and again greeted at the Inn by a Capuchin on the quest. And thus pleasantly ends this entertaining Journal.

More than a hundred years have passed since Mrs. Thrale died, an octogenarian, at Bath; vivacious and witty, tireless and indomitable to the last, writing till she could hold the pen no longer, pouring forth her recollections of the past. To-day, like a gift from her tomb comes this fresh and vivid light on Johnson's Paris sojourn, and thus she leaves us more than ever in her debt. For, as a noted man of letters has said, 'This woman greatly beloved, whose society Johnson preferred to that of the greatest and wisest, and whom he celebrated in prose and verse, has done more than anyone who ever lived (with one solitary exception) to preserve, consecrate, and crystallise his fame.'

ROBERT BRACEY, O.P.

A NOTE ON PHENOMENOLOGY

PHENOMENOLOGY is that movement in German philosophical thought which marks the return from subjectivity to objectivity. Husserl, its founder, posited the existence of an *a priori* order of truth before any subjective thought; Max Scheler transferred it into the domain of ethics and practice, an *a priori* hierarchy of objective values before all subjective life; Martin Heidegger established a new ontology as 'first philosophy,' an objective existence before all subjective consciousness. *La Phénoménologie (Journées d'Études de la Société Thomiste, I)* contains papers by Dom Feuling and Fr. Kremer; the former describes phenomenology in itself, the latter compares it with Thomism. The discussion which followed and in which various distinguished visitors took part is also reported. The Society is to be congratulated on a meeting which should dispel the notion that Thomism is an exclusive system living in isolation and insensitive to other aspects of truth which have been discovered since the thirteenth century. These papers are important: they will receive due attention in a later issue of BLACKFRIARS.

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