## Samuel Johnson, a shelf of books, and an uncomfortable question: “Why don’t I understand this stuff?”

“He was incredibly generous and essentially ran a welfare state of his own. There was an old lady he took in and she accompanied him to fashionable places where she caused distress by her poor table manners. His adopted son, Frank Barber, was a freed black slave and became his heir. He took in reformed prostitutes and half a dozen others. He spent half his money on derelicts and drop-outs. He showed a goodness that is rarely practised on this scale. I quoted him in my Party Conference speech in 1992, when I was Social Security Secretary, saying: “A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilisation.”

From Peter Lilley’s brief essay “The Best Books on Samuel Johnson”

Lilly was a Member of Parliament (UK) for St Albans from 1983-1997.

<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/peter-lilley-on-samuel-johnson/>

Most of us, we members of ‘our club’ here in Australia, could pretty well guess which five books Lilley has chosen as his ‘best’ on Johnson. There will be no prizes for guessing number one but some of us might well be able to guess his number two: John Wain’s biography published in 1974. It was Wain who I read just before finding a notice about a group gathering for its first meeting in Melbourne which, incidentally, I missed by a week.

During the later years of my teaching career it was my habit to clear a shelf of books after the school term to make room for the books which would inevitably follow. Among my regrets were the loss of a beautiful complete Dickens but most especially for having foolishly hauled off a nice collection of Johnson, including the John Wain biography, to a local bookseller. Only recently have I been able to find another clean copy to ease that ache.

A brief glance at the themes covered in our yearly seminars will show that we are all aware of the subtle webs of ideas, controversies, political and philosophical notions, the arts, and connections between vivid personalities over time. As a musician spending my youth and early adulthood devoting intense emotional and intellectual energy to learning to listening to and speak in the mysterious language of music, I found Wain’s writing nudged me to become open to yet another world, that of eighteenth century Britain.

He was born John Barrington Wain (1925-1994) living life as a West Midlands poet, freelance journalist and author, and reviewer for newspapers and radio. His second wife (of three), Eirian Mary James, was deputy director of the recorded sound department of the British Council. Among his many memorable statements is “I have nothing to say. And I am saying it. That’s poetry.” Now, I know, I don’t *need* to know that but I find it fascinating how even those few fragments may suggest why he too was drawn to Johnson. There seem to be certain resonances between the two.

In the years since I first began reading Johnson and others that question has kept cropping up: “Why don’t I understand?” While a musician’s mind doesn’t easily run along the same track as other patterns of thought, like philosophy, my interest in Johnson, The Club, and other figures of the period continues to present those who built the groundwork for our modern world, like it or not. So, now I am gathering another shelf of books including A. C. Grayling’s *The History of Philosophy* (2019), Jane Glover’s *Handel in London* (2018, 2019), Christopher Janaway’s *Schopenhauer: a very short introduction* (2002), Roger Scruton’s *Kant: a brief insight* (1982, 2001, 2010), Jesse Norman’s *Edmund Burke: the First* Conservative (2013), and the slightly odd but helpful *50 Philosophy Classics* by Tom Butler-Bowdon (2013, 2017).

Clearly, many will shake their heads at such ill-discipline, but I am now of an age when I don’t anymore care.

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