Mr Irwin – Kiwi Johnsonian and the Hawk

*Peter Hardie*

We in New Zealand are living in the most extraordinary of times; our Parliament has been suspended and state of emergency has been declared. Mr Dorwick, is right – what better time to pull out the Johnsonia and give it a jolly good clean. In Mr Dorwick’s entertaining contribution he provided a link to Peter Lilley’s best five books on Johnson; Boswell’s Life, Wain’s Biography, Walter Bate’s work, Richard Holmes’ portrayal of Johnson and Richard Savage and a work by the famed Donald Greene (in that order).

Might I suggest two others:

One, a forgotten text written by a humble New Zealander. Mr George Irwin’s “Samuel Johnson: A Personality in Conflict” 1971 Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press (for the bibliophiles - Printed in New Zealand in 11 and 12 Point Intertype Janson by Wright & Carman Ltd, Trentham).

In the preface Irwin writes:

 *“On 18 September 1768, his fifty-ninth birthday, Samuel Johnson tortured by vile melancholy, wrote in his diary,’ I have now begun the sixtieth year of my life. How the last year has passed I am unwilling to terrify myself with thinking. This day has been passed in great perturbation’. Three years later this once incessantly tormented man wrote,’ I am now come to my sixty third year. For the last year I have been slowly recovering both from the violence of my last illness and, I think, from the general disease of my life.’*

*This recovery which Johnson made from the general disease of his life, as he called his neurosis, is both a unique experience in self-fulfilment and a triumph of courage and endurance. It is also, being a pre-Freudian recovery from neurosis an event of unusual psychotherapeutic interest."*

Mr Irwin wrote this book as an extension of an essay he had written and published in 1963. That essay was republished in 1965 in "Samuel Johnson: A Collection of Critical Essays", a book edited by none other than Donald Greene, author of number five in Peter Lilley's list.

According to the dust jacket, Irwin was a New Zealand teacher and former director of the teachers training college in Western Samoa and Samuel Johnson was the object of a lifelong devotion; this book is the outcome of intensive work on Johnson's personality over more than a decade. The author died on 23 February 1971, as his book was about to be delivered to the printer." As Johnson well knew, life can be very cruel.

Of the book, the dust jacket says:

*"This book traces the origin and course of the general disease of Dr Johnson's life, the ’vile melancholy’ which tormented during most of his life.*

*The evidence is all available in the records of Dr Johnson's life and in his writings, which are more often than not autobiographical. George Irwin has brought together in an illuminating account Johnson's uneasy relations with his mother, his struggles to understand and master his neurosis, and the relief which finally came through the largely unconscious agency of Mrs Thrale.*

*The narrative, which is graphic and lucid, keeps closely to the primary evidence, interpreted with insights deriving from modern psychological knowledge, but without jargon and with common sense. From it emerges a picture of a courageous man whose greatness is enhanced by a full understanding of the terrors with which he contended."*

I commend the book to the members, if you can find it. Like so much great New Zealand work it is no doubt lost in the mountains of grist produced in Australia since 1965.

The second book is not one on Johnson, but rather an interesting book on Boswell of which I had never heard. I found the book in a second-hand bookshop in Dunedin, it is called "The Hooded Hawk or the Case of Mr Boswell". It is a hardback in excellent condition, still sporting the sticker of the original bookseller, "South's Book Depot". The book is by D B Wyndham Lewis and appears to be a defence of Boswell from the criticism that he endured because of his myriad weaknesses. I have not read the book but look forward to doing so, and perhaps with this lockdown the time will present itself to do so.

Good luck to you all.

Peter Hardie

Matamata NZ



*An advertisement from 1947 for South’s Book Depot in Wellington*