

A Great Hero of Letters

"The Achievement of Samuel Johnson," by Walter Jackson Bate (Oxford University Press, 248 pp. \$4.50), attempts to prove that the well-known eighteenth-century literary figure was as good a writer as he was a talker. Joseph Wood Krutch, our reviewer, is the author of a widely read and highly regarded biography of Johnson.

By Joseph Wood Krutch

WHEN Samuel Johnson died he was regarded in England as the perfect example of what Carlyle was to call "The Hero as Man of Letters." By Carlyle's own time Johnson had shrunk to a mere eccentric personality and by the beginning of our own century there were those who regarded both him and Boswell's "Life" of him as high on the list of the world's great bores. Now the curve of his rehabilitation has followed precisely the curve of his decline. Johnson "came back" as an amusing talker in the pages of Boswell; in certain circles at least he is now being referred to again as a great writer as well. Professor Bate's book is the first modern work to treat him primarily as the profound thinker he was. It almost looks as though we were about to get the whole great man back again.

Professor Bate is no popularizer. His book is closely written and cannot possibly find the audience which easier books have won. But it can hardly fail to impress those who will take the trouble to read it, and it has two very great virtues. It deals primarily with Johnson's thought rather than with his personality or his eccentricity and it digs deep into those periodical essays which his contemporaries so much admired but which modern readers have almost completely neglected. There is, I think, no other way in which Johnson the thinker can be recovered.

Many who ought to know better still sometimes speak as though Johnson's own literary works were merely elephantine pomposities occasionally illuminated by flashes of the witty intransigence which enlivened his conversation. If they were not put off by his now unfashionable vocabulary and his tendency to operate often on a higher level of abstraction than

modern writing tends to favor they would perceive that few men have ever pondered more persistently upon the human predicament or ever traced more perceptively the labyrinthine ways of the human mind. He was one of the greatest of descriptive psychologists and he knew as well as anyone has ever known the truth of Pope's description of man: "Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;/Still by himself abused or disabused;/Created half to rise and half to fall/Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all."

Everybody knows, for instance, that Johnson called remarriage "the triumph of hope over experience." Too few realize that this is not only witty and cynical but that it is also solidly founded upon an inclusive understanding of the general fact more compendiously stated in one of those abstractions which for some curious reason a hundred years have found repellent: "The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure but from hope to hope." Scattered through the essays and, of course, through the only somewhat neglected "Rasselas" are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of equally succinct generalizations and an equal number of shrewd comments on specific be-

havior. What did Thorstein Veblen ever say which is not summarized in Johnson's remark that we "fill our houses with useless ornaments, only to show that we can buy them"? Do not the Freudians claim originality for having discovered "a kind of anxious cleanliness—the superfluous scrupulosity of guilt, dreading discovery, shunning suspicion"?

The core of Professor Bate's book is the three chapters which take as titles three of Johnson's phrases: "The Hunger of Imagination," "The Treachery of the Human Heart," and "The Stability of Truth." No one else, I think, has ever more successfully attempted to codify the profoundest of Johnson's convictions in such a way as to illuminate and unify his thinking. Perhaps the most significant difference between what is called Johnson's pessimism or his sense of the unsatisfactoriness of human life and the more familiar "disillusion" of more recent writers is this: To him the unsatisfied "hunger of imagination" is not for something which does not exist but for something which has not been found. "Few of the hours of life are filled up with objects adequate to the mind of man," he has written. Wisdom consists in filling as many of them as possible with objects which are as little inadequate as one can find. The Christian hope, to which Johnson somewhat desperately clung, is simply this: since man, unlike the beasts, is never satisfied in this life the fact that he is not satisfied may imply another in which his capacities will find full employment.



"Son, this is the third fatted calf we've had to slay for you! When are you going to settle down?"

The Too Old Boy

"Portrait of Barrie," by Cynthia Asquith (E. P. Dutton. 230 pp. \$3.50), brings together some reminiscences by his secretary of the author of "Peter Pan" during the last twenty years of his life. Here it is reviewed by Edgar Johnson, chairman of the English department of the City College of New York and author of several biographies.

By Edgar Johnson

"PORTRAIT OF BARRIE," as its title implies, is not a formal, full-length biography. Instead it is a colorful, impressionistic mingling of reminiscence and character by Cynthia Asquith, Barrie's secretary and friend for the last twenty years of his life. During these years—unless we except the official honors that continued to pour in upon him—there were no important or dramatic events in Barrie's life. He had already written the work on which his fame and popularity rested. He now turned out only infrequent trifles, save for the tenuous and touching "Mary Rose" and for "The Boy David," whose relative failure on the stage deeply distressed him.

His life moved peacefully between his tobacco-laden, smoke-stained Adelphi flat high above the Thames (with its cavelike, ash-heaped fireplace on a dais dominating one side of his book-lined room) and Stanways, the country retreat he rented in Gloucestershire, a golden, gabled house with a tremendous latticed oriel window. The man portrayed against these backgrounds emerges from hundreds of little strokes: his sad, sunken eyes of an unbelievably bright blue, his huge domed forehead, the hoarse, mournful voice with its rumbling burr interrupted by a constant cough from the smoke of his great bull-dog pipe; the figure whose tininess so troubled him that he perversely emphasized it. (At Hardy's funeral Bernard Shaw felt his own tall and striking presence quite eclipsed: "Barrie, blast him!" Shaw said. "Made himself look specially small.")

Only a few samples can be given of the character touches by which he is painted in this book, but they are quite as vivid as the physical description. We see him playing games, even tricks with tumblers, plates, and corks, and beating H. G. Wells at them all. "I wish," he said mischievously, "we could think of something Wells can do. Tell us about the Mar-



Cynthia Asquith—"vivid . . . revealing."

tians, Wells." At croquet he could whack his ball so as to make it leap right over an intervening ball and sail triumphantly through a wicket. Clearing out his chaotic desk his startled secretary found £1,700 in uncashed checks. His butler was an erudite reader of the Greek and Latin classics who while carving the lamb might quietly murmur "Wasn't it Petra, sir?" when none of the guests could remember the city referred to in the line "A rose-red city half as old as Time." His cook believed that the proper way to serve oysters was to disinter the corpse from its shell and bring each diner a single one lying appallingly naked on a bit of toast.

Barrie was not, Mrs. Asquith insists, a prototype of his own Peter Pan, the boy who wouldn't grow up. On the contrary, hard childhood circumstances had forced his growing up too quickly and made Peter a wish-fulfillment of what had never been. And Barrie hated being called "whimsical"; he was delighted when one London critic spoke of his "sneer" and called him "cruel as well as sinister."

Besides the cumulative touches by which Barrie himself is conveyed there are many bright word-vignettes of other people: Augustine Birrell, Charles Whibley, Professor Tonks, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Sir Walter Raleigh, and G. K. Chesterton. The book does not follow a strict chronological order, and it is a pity that in the latter half the material becomes dull and the writing flat; there should have been drastic cuts and a more careful polishing. Nevertheless, the first half is not only entertaining, but full of vivid and revealing portrayal of a character.

Crossing the Critics

"Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait," by Edward Wagenknecht (Longmans, Green. 384 pp. \$6), attempts to measure the true stature of a famous nineteenth-century American poet. Our reviewer, Leon Edel, is the author of the highly regarded "Henry James: The Untried Years."

By Leon Edel

TO SPECIFY that the biography of a poet named Longfellow is of full length is a jest worthy of Falstaff. But a reading of "Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait" soon banishes any frivolous notions which the author Wagenknecht may imply in his title. Mr. Wagenknecht is deadl serious, and his concern with the stature of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—who wasn't quite as tall as his name—is with his critical stature. As a biographer he feels that the poet has been made out smaller than he was by a debunking generation of critics, and so he sets out to debunk the debunkers, a popular exercise these days.

To measure the critical stature of Longfellow is perhaps more difficult than might be supposed, since the poet is woven for so many of us into the emotions of the nursery and of the grade-school. If we did not lisp "Hiawatha" at a breakneck pace we celebrated the brawn of the village blacksmith or the thrill of Paul Revere's ride, or we had to listen to hushed readings of "The Children's Hour." A name thus encrusted with old emotions, individual and even national, figures as something of a myth to which some have become allergic and which to others has the soft glow of a childhood and unforgettable past.

Such a familiar figure particularly demands critical illumination and judicial appraisal, but Mr. Wagenknecht's biography, it is to be feared, is stronger in praise than in appraisal. He is both defensive and bellicose in his bestowal of it. A poet he holds is either great or he isn't great, and it's up to the biographer to lay down the law and flatten out the dissenters. There is nothing wrong with this kind of literary study for it does have the strength of its enthusiasm even when it tends to be short on critical perspective. But it is a rather old-fashioned approach a little out of harmony with a century which has taught us that in the eval-

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