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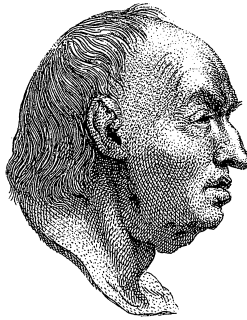
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SAMUEL JOHNSON
Political Writings

EDITED BY DONALD J. GREENE



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PREFACE

The plan of this collection of political writings by Johnson is explained at the end of the second section of the "Introduction," and there is no need to repeat it here. What should be added, however, is that the fairly detailed historical commentary I have provided was written a considerable time ago, and unforeseen circumstances (chiefly economic) have delayed its appearance in print. In the interim, much good work has been done on the political history of Great Britain during Johnson's lifetime. Had they been available, I should have been happy to make use of such works as (among others) John Brooke's *King George III* (1972) and Reed Browning's *The Duke of Newcastle* (1975) to support some of the generalizations about the political events of the time that I permit myself. Since, ironically, the delay has resulted in the appearance of the volume during the celebration of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, it would have been tempting to discuss *Taxation No Tyranny* in the light of Brooke's contention that the "American Revolution" was not a revolution in the sense that the French and Russian revolutions were, but a rebellion, like that of the Dutch against the King of Spain in the sixteenth century; that it was "the first great nationalist rising of modern times. . . . The Declaration of Independence marks the emergence of nationalism as a force in modern history"; that "the fathers of the American republic were the heirs of the Tory tradition in British politics, and perhaps the only true Tories in the world today are to be found in the United States." So far as I can tell, however, valuable as this recent historical writing has been in filling in gaps in detail, there has been little modification of the basic outline of the political scene in the reigns of George II and George III that I have relied on—that sketched by Sir Lewis Namier,

John B. Owen, and others listed in the first footnote to the "Introduction"—and no serious distortion of Johnson's political pronouncements will occur, I believe, by continuing to view them in that framework.

I acknowledge my gratitude to those who read the work before publication and offered valuable suggestions: James L. Clifford, Robert Halsband, Allen T. Hazen, the late Frederick W. Hilles, Matthew Hodgart, Gwin J. Kolb, Herman W. Liebert, and John H. Middendorf, the general editor of the series, and to Professor Middendorf's editorial assistants, Barbara Jetton and Marjorie David. A good deal of the editorial work was done during my tenure of a senior fellowship of the Canada Council, and I wish to express my gratitude to that body.

D. J. G.

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A number of changes have occurred in the Editorial Committee since the publication of the previous volume. We record with sorrow the deaths of the following members, whom we hold in affectionate memory: Frederick W. Hilles, Robert F. Metzdorf, L. F. Powell, and William K. Wimsatt. We regret the resignation of M. J. C. Hodgart. It is a pleasure to report the appointment to the Editorial Committee of James Gray, Arthur G. Rippey, Gwin J. Kolb, and Albrecht B. Strauss, who was elected Secretary of the Committee. In the final stages of the preparation of this volume, the General Editor was assisted by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. For this support the Editorial Committee is sincerely grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

I

The historical scholarship of the past four decades, beginning with the work of Sir Lewis Namier,¹ has destroyed beyond any likelihood of repair the Victorian myth of the political structure of England during the eighteenth century, and with it the Victorian picture of the political position of various eighteenth-century figures, including Samuel Johnson. That myth, popular because it was easy to grasp and because it could readily be used by propagandists to serve partisan interests, dominated British historiography for about a century, from the time of Lord Macaulay in the 1830's and 40's down to that of his grand-nephew, George Macaulay Trevelyan, in the 1920's and 30's. Though it seems unlikely that it can subsist much longer in the face of its unanimous abandonment by serious historical scholars, it is dying with great reluctance. Since it still interferes with the twentieth century's attitude

1. A decade or so ago, a reasonably complete bibliography of post-"Whig interpretation" historiography of eighteenth-century Britain could be comprehended in around a dozen titles (cf. D. J. Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, 1960, p. 288, n. 7). It is now far beyond the scope of a footnote. An excellent guide to recent work on the century will be found in the bibliographical essays by William A. Bultmann, "Early Hanoverian England," and J. Jean Hecht, "The Reign of George III," in Elizabeth C. Furber, ed., *Changing Views on British History: Essays on Historical Writing Since 1939* (1966). A few titles of particular use to the student of Johnson's political background are Sir Lewis Namier, "Monarchy and the Party System" and "Country Gentlemen in Parliament," in his *Personalities and Powers* (1955); Robert Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1956); John B. Owen, *The Rise of the Pelhams* (1957); J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* (1956-) (2 vols. published of a projected 3-vol. study); Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (1953); *Letters from George III to Lord Bute, 1756-1766*, ed. Romney Sedgwick (1939) (Sedgwick's introduction is important); Archibald S. Foord, *His Majesty's Opposition, 1714-1830* (1964).

toward Johnson, we should do well to spend some time examining it.

The Victorian or "Whig"² interpretation of eighteenth-century British history itself originated in eighteenth-century British politics. Popularized in the nineteenth century by Macaulay, J. R. Green, Lecky, and others, it took its inspiration from hints found in Burke's writings in support of the Rockingham Whig faction in the 1760's and 70's and other political propaganda of the time. The Rockingham group, the successors of the Whigs who followed the leadership of Sir Robert Walpole and the Pelhams (Henry Pelham and his brother, the Duke of Newcastle) in the earlier eighteenth century and the predecessors of those who followed Charles James Fox and Earl Grey in the early nineteenth, after enjoying many years of power in the reigns of George I and II, found themselves out of office on the accession of George III in 1760. Since the young George had made no secret of his loyalty to the politics of his father, Frederick, Prince of Wales, one of the most persistent leaders of opposition to Walpole, the Rockinghamites could not have been too much surprised when the new monarch, determined to preserve the traditional right of independence of the executive, sought his ministers among Whigs outside the Walpole-Pelham-Rockingham succession—his boyhood tutor and Prince Frederick's political adviser, the Scottish Earl of Bute; William Pitt, later Earl of Chatham, who had begun his career in the 1730's as one of the most vociferous anti-Walpolian "Patriot" Whigs; George Grenville, Pitt's brother-in-law, though now politically at odds with him. Nor should it have astonished the Rockinghamites when politically ambitious young men like Lord North, Lord Shelburne, and the Duke of Grafton gravitated away from them and accepted office under other auspices.

2. The phrase "the Whig interpretation of history" comes from Herbert Butterfield's important monograph bearing that title (1931). It must not be taken to mean simply that Macaulay and the rest favoured the Whigs; it means, according to Butterfield, the method of historical interpretation which views as laudable anything that contributed to bringing about the state of things which in fact came to pass, and as deplorable anything which militated against that outcome—the "ratification of the present," as he calls it.

During the rest of the century, indeed, the Marquess of Rockingham and his successor, Charles James Fox, headed ministries only during two short periods, in 1765 and again in 1782-83—at the end, in a coalition with their old enemy, Lord North, which disgusted the electorate with its bold cynicism.

These developments were natural enough in a political context where few important ideological divisions existed, as was normally the situation in eighteenth-century Britain (and as it has been throughout a great deal of the history of the United States); where political contests were largely jockeyings for power in a setting of constantly shifting alliances and groupings. But they caused intense resentment among the Rockinghamites, displaced after so many decades in power; and their theoretician and propagandist, Edmund Burke,³ in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, 1770, worked out an elaborate “line” to justify that resentment. With that touch of the paranoid which characterizes a good deal of Burke’s political writing, the work hinted at conspiratorial activities by George III and an “Inner Cabinet” of “the King’s Friends” to subvert the constitution and restore royal absolutism. A corollary was that the Rockinghamites were the only vehicles of “Whiggism” pure and undefiled, the preservers of the authentic tradition of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, whereas the other Whig politicians, who collaborated with George III, were self-seeking betrayers of that tradition, and therefore no more than

3. The notion that Burke and Johnson, because they have both been described as “conservatives,” were politically sympathetic, cannot be seriously entertained. The evidence usually cited in support of this thesis consists of praise bestowed by Johnson on Burke’s intellectual powers and eloquence. For Burke as politician, however, Johnson had nothing but the harshest condemnation; e.g., “In private life he is a very honest gentleman; but I will not allow him to be so in public life. People *may* be honest, though they are doing wrong: that is between their Maker and them. But *we*, who are suffering by their pernicious conduct, are to destroy them. We are sure that —— acts from interest. We know what his genuine principles were. They who allow their passions to confound the distinctions between right and wrong are criminal. They may be convinced; but they have not come honestly by their conviction” (*Life*, III. 45 f.; see also II. 222 f., 348).

“Tories” in disguise.⁴ Nineteenth-century historians followed their lead and with a straight face labelled Bute, Grafton, North, and the younger Pitt Tories, a designation that would have astonished them and many of their contemporaries.

Tories in the eighteenth century were for the most part the “country gentlemen,” the “squirearchy,” the “gentry,”⁵ hereditary possessors of relatively small manorial estates in the English countryside. They contributed from a fourth to a fifth of the membership of the House of Commons (they were underrepresented in the House of Lords, peerages then as later being awarded to loyal supporters of the current ministry). In the Commons, they remained mostly inarticulate back-benchers, sporadically giving their votes to some minister—Harley or North or the younger Pitt—who pleased them. But basically they were not much interested in playing an active role on the national political scene, though they were very active in local politics; concerned that agriculture be supported and land taxation be kept down, and that the central government should interfere with them as little as possible. They were generally “isolationists,” “little Englanders,” suspicious of foreign involvements that might lead to wars and higher taxes. They prided themselves on their political independence, frequently dividing their votes equally on both sides of a controversial measure—indeed, they were sometimes referred to as “the independent members.” Henry Fielding’s Squire Western is a caricature of the type by an urban, “Patriot” Whig, no doubt libellous as regards the education, speech, and manners of the average Tory squire,

4. The Tories maintained, with considerable justification, that this was also a slander against *them*: “In 1688, the Tories concurred in the bringing about the Revolution, eminently concurred, and therefore they have as just a right to the fruits of it as any other set of men in Britain, whatever some may pretend to the contrary” (*The Sentiments of a Tory in Respect to a Late Important Transaction*, 1741, quoted in Greene, *Politics*, p. 275).

5. The political position of “the gentry” in the seventeenth century has recently been the subject of much investigation and debate. H. R. Trevor-Roper has maintained, “It [the Great Rebellion of the 1640’s] was the blind revolt of the gentry against the Court, of the provinces against the capital” (“The Country-House Radicals,” in his *Men and Events*, 1958, p. 179). The subsequent history of the Tories in the eighteenth century suggests a continuation of provincial “grass-roots” resistance to the Establishment in Westminster.

but reasonably accurate as regards his political attitudes. After 1714, they never had the parliamentary strength or the cohesiveness to form anything that could possibly be called a "Tory" administration, though their votes, holding the balance of power between conflicting Whig factions, could affect the existence of ministries—it was their defection which brought about the downfall of the North ministry in 1782.

A Whig, *per contra*, was an activist in national politics, someone anxious that the central administration push the country's future in a direction congenial to the interests of his own economic group. "Big business" in the City of London and Bristol tended to be Whig; so did the upper strata of the peerage, with their huge holdings of land (often discovered, in the later part of the century, to be profitably underlaid with coal)—the dukes and marquesses whom Burke admired and served so faithfully, on the ground that what was good for the Rockinghams and Richmonds was good for Britain. Naturally, not all Whigs wanted to push the country in precisely the same direction or to secure governmental power for the same collection of individuals: the great political contests of the century were all between warring groups of Whigs, with occasional Tories as fitful and tepid allies on one side or the other.

To identify all these fluctuating Whig groupings and sort out their aims would require a volume in itself, though very often their aims can be summed up as merely the acquisition of office and patronage. One highly important opposition in matters of large national policy can, however, be discerned. The Pittites were distinctly the spokesmen for the business community, and the tendency of the policies they advocated was always in the direction of aggressive commercial and imperial expansion, so as to provide an ever broader base for British trading and industrial enterprise. The Walpole-Pelham-Rockingham group, on the other hand, representing the more diversified and secure interests of the great territorial magnates—"old money," by contrast with the "new money" of business—tended to be more cautious and conservative. In 1739, Pitt and his allies manoeuvred Walpole into war with Spain, in order to force an opening for Britain in the Spanish monopoly of South American and Pacific

trade, and presently brought about his downfall. This victory proved only temporary; Walpole's political heirs, Henry Pelham and Newcastle, kept their grip on the helm during the 1740's and 50's. But in 1756, with the commencement of the Seven Years' War—the Great War for the Empire, as Lawrence Gipson calls it⁶—Pitt won the game. Britain emerged from the war with a huge overseas empire, and her future as the great commercial world-power of the nineteenth century was assured. It should be noted that the role of the modern Conservative Party in Great Britain as the party of that country's industrial, trading, and financial interests is an inheritance from the younger Pitt and his successors—not from the eighteenth-century Tories. They, as might be expected, generally preferred the lesser evil of the Walpolians to the Pittites; when Walpole was fighting for his political life, in 1741, they supported him rather than the Whig opposition with their votes in the Commons.⁷ Johnson, after violently attacking Walpole for a short time in the late 1730's, came around to defending him; his detestation of the Pitts and what they stood for never wavered throughout his later life.

Burke, Junius, and other anti-ministerial propagandists in the 1760's and 70's, however, succeeded in altering the nomenclature of party, for the nineteenth century if not for their own; though the beginnings of the change can be detected in the later part of the eighteenth century, when we find Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and other younger contemporaries of Johnson using "Tory" somewhat as it came to be used in the Victorian histories—that is, to designate someone who supported the Grenville, Grafton, and North administrations, the designation "Whig" now being monopolized by the Rockinghamites, in almost permanent opposition. (That this is *not* how Johnson and his generation used the terms is clear

6. In his multivolumed history, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution* (1936–70). In an essay, "Samuel Johnson and the Great War for Empire," in *English Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John H. Middelndorf (1971), I attempt to bring together the evidence for SJ's attitude toward the war, its origins, and its aftermath.

7. In the vote in the House of Commons on 13 Feb 1741, on Sandys's motion to remove Walpole from office, 20 Tories voted against the motion and another 35 abstained. Johnson (presumably) defends their action in a note appended to the *Gentleman's Magazine's* report of the division (*GM*, XIII [Apr 1743], 181).

when we find Johnson, in *The False Alarm*, 1770, warmly defending the actions of the Grafton-North ministry in the Wilkes affair, and at the same time condemning the “frigid neutrality” of “*the Tories*” on the subject.⁸) Macaulay later developed this terminological innovation into a grandiose yet marvellously simple philosophy of history and political science. History is the record of the inevitable “progress” of the British people down the centuries; throughout this time all politically minded individuals can be divided into two classes: those who seek to assist that advance (the Whigs), and are therefore to be approved of, and those who seek to halt it or turn it backward (the Tories), and are therefore to be condemned. In Macaulay’s own words,

The History of England is emphatically the history of progress. It is the history of a constant movement of the public mind, of a constant change in the institutions of a great society. . . . We have often thought that the motion of the public mind in our country resembles that of the sea when the tide is rising. Each successive wave rushes forward, breaks, and rolls back; but the great flood is steadily coming in.⁹

Throughout the whole of that great movement [from Magna Carta, 1215, to the Reform Act, 1832] there have been, under some name or other, two sets of men, those who were before their age, and those who were behind it. . . . Though a Tory may now be very like what a Whig was a hundred and twenty years ago, the Whig is as much in advance of the Tory as ever.¹

It is hard to know whether the audacity or the naïveté of these postulates is the more breathtaking (though it must be pointed out, in defence of Macaulay’s acumen, that in all this he is constructing a basis for the glorification of his own party, Lord Grey’s Whigs, the successors of Burke’s and Rockingham’s, and for the support of the fiercely contested Reform Bill, which they passed in 1832; for doing so, he was richly

8. P. 344 below.

9. Review of Sir James Mackintosh, *History of the Revolution*, in F. C. Montague, ed., *Critical and Historical Essays* (1903), II. 72-74.

1. Review of Lord Mahon, *War of the Spanish Succession*, *ibid.*, I. 531.

rewarded by party patronage, his five-year appointment as Member of the Council for India making him independently wealthy for the rest of his life). Yet the notion that all political history since the beginning of time can be explained in terms of such a dichotomy—Whig versus Tory, or progressive versus reactionary, or “left wing” versus “right wing”²—seems to exercise an almost irresistible attraction on the modern mind. When it is pointed out that Johnson’s Toryism was not very much like what the twentieth century calls “Toryism,” one of the most frequent responses is “Oh, you mean he was more of a Whig than we had thought?” The answer, of course, is that he was not at all a Whig; he was completely a Tory; but that an eighteenth-century Tory was as different from what is called a Tory in the twentieth century as a “liberal” of Queen Victoria’s reign (who believed that the freedom of individual enterprise to accumulate wealth should be unhampered by any interference from governments) is from a mid-twentieth-century American “liberal” (who believes precisely the opposite); in short, that the Macaulayan dichotomy is a fallacy, and to try to interpret such subtle and complex political thinking as Johnson’s in terms of it will inevitably result in gross distortion.

II

To understand Johnson’s political views, then, we must firmly resist the temptation to impose on the political events, attitudes, and vocabulary of eighteenth-century Britain any such “left-versus-right” pattern as that contrived by Macaulay and later theorizers: it simply does not apply. We must also,

2. The history of this metaphor, supposed to derive from the semicircular seating of the revolutionary French National Assembly, would make an interesting study. How arbitrary the terms are may be seen in an early use of them by Sir Adolphus Ward, *The Electress Sophia and the Hanoverian Succession*, 2nd ed. (1909), p. 550. Ward is speaking of dissident Episcopal clergymen in Scotland after the Revolution of 1688: “The tendency was for such men to conform to Presbytery, but they formed a distinct ‘left wing.’” Nowadays students would instinctively term the Scottish Episcopalians, many of them Jacobites, “right wing” and the Presbyterians, sturdy supporters of the Revolution, “left wing,” even though (and this is presumably Ward’s point) in Scotland at the time Presbyterianism was orthodox, official, “the Establishment,” and Episcopalians were a dissenting minority.

of course, rid our minds of the various legends about Johnson himself that literary historians have assiduously constructed and propagated during the past two centuries, and be willing to look at the evidence of his own political writings with clear eyes and see what they actually say.

One of the most persistent of these legends has been that which maintains that Johnson was not really politically minded at all, and that his scanty and trivial writings on political matters may be safely neglected. The beginnings of this legend can be traced in the pages of Boswell, who did not meet Johnson until after the first two of Johnson's three major periods of close political involvement, those concerned with the attack on Walpole in the late 1730's and early 1740's, and with the Seven Years' War, two decades later. Boswell indeed had little opportunity, during Johnson's lifetime at least, to acquaint himself thoroughly with the writings of Johnson which resulted from those involvements, for many of them remained obscurely known until considerably later. The third period, that of Johnson's defence of certain actions of the administrations of the Duke of Grafton and Lord North in the early 1770's, did coincide with the time of Boswell's acquaintance with him. Boswell makes a show of doing his duty by Johnson's four pamphlets of this period, but clearly he is not as much interested in them as in something like the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, which displays more fully what Boswell probably thought of as the "real" Johnson—the "personality," rather than the thinker and writer—and deals with matters more familiar to Boswell than the complexities of the English political scene. Moreover, on the subjects of two of those works, *The False Alarm* and *Taxation No Tyranny*, Boswell's opinions are the reverse of Johnson's: he sympathizes with his friend Wilkes and the rebellious American colonists, and in his account of the pamphlets in the *Life*, he does not hesitate to impugn their competence most vigorously. Basically, though, Boswell is not much interested in exploring political questions in depth.³

3. Frank Brady, *Boswell's Political Career* (1965), shows that Boswell was willing to devote much attention to certain political matters—in particular, that of trying to get a seat in Parliament for himself—but the book confirms the statement above. "He made no pretense to political theory, or even to a large view of affairs, like Burke," Brady says (p. 2).