

BOOKSHELF

‘The Club’ Review: ‘An Assembly of Good Fellows’

Edmund Burke, Edward Gibbon and Adam Smith were members—but Samuel Johnson outshone them all.

By Joseph Epstein

What historical era produced the greatest aggregate of human intelligence? Fifth century B.C. Greece provided Socrates and Plato, Pericles and Phidias. In 18th-century France there were the philosophes, among them D’Alembert, Diderot, Voltaire, Helvétius. The founding generation of the republic—Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and Adams—would be America’s entry. My own choice would be for middle- and late 18th-century London, where Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, Edward Gibbon, Joshua Reynolds, Oliver

Goldsmith, James Boswell, David Garrick, Charles James Fox, Adam Smith, David Hume and Richard Brinsley Sheridan walked the streets. These men knew one another well and, with the exception of Hume, belonged to the same club, which met on Friday evenings at the Turk’s Head Tavern, at 9 Gerrard Street, off the Strand. Here was a club that even Groucho Marx, who claimed he wouldn’t care to belong to any club that would accept him as a member, could not have resisted joining.

The two founding members of the Club, or the Literary Club as it is sometimes known, were Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson, the always generous Reynolds having proposed it to Johnson in 1764, in the hope of helping lift him out of one of his fairly regular bouts of depression. The original notion was to limit the Club to nine members, though this number would expand in later years. Convivial talk on a wide range of subjects—contentious politics only not encouraged—was the reason for the formation of the Club. (In his “Dictionary,” Johnson defined a club as “an assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions.”) Dinner would be served, wine drunk, wits matched. The most notable among these wits were those of Johnson and Edmund Burke, of whom Johnson said “his stream of mind is perpetual.” Not all the members were of equal distinction. Boswell was not allowed membership until 1773, and this based less on his merit than on his friendship with Johnson. The prospect of women members wasn’t up for discussion.

The Club is the ostensible subject of Leo Damrosch’s excellent book of the same name. I write “ostensible” because the Club itself gets very little direct attention in Mr. Damrosch’s pages, despite its giving him his title. Several pages in the book are devoted to Henry and Hester Thrale, who offered Johnson a second home late in his life. The novelist Fanny Burney, who wrote trenchantly on Johnson, is included, and so, too, David Hume. The real subject of “The Club” is literary life in England in the second half of the 18th century.

Leo Damrosch, a professor of literature at Harvard, has written books on the Quakers, William Blake, Rousseau, Swift, Tocqueville and others. In his career he has achieved the ideal for academic publication set many years ago by Jacques Barzun at Columbia: that of impeccable scholarship at the service of absolute lucidity, resulting in work that can be enjoyed by thoughtful readers both inside and outside the academy. “The Club” is such a work—learned, penetrating, a pleasure to read.

As Samuel Johnson seems to have dominated every room he ever entered, so does he dominate Mr. Damrosch’s book, which might have been titled “Samuel Johnson & Friends.” One friend in particular, James Boswell, is heavily featured: the oddest of odd couples, Boswell and Johnson, each owing his lasting fame to the other. “If Boswell found in Johnson the father he should have had,” Mr. Damrosch writes, “Johnson found in him the son he never had.” But this was more than a father-and-son relation. Without

Boswell's biography, Samuel Johnson the essayist and lexicographer would not have anything like the high standing he does today. And Boswell, had he not written his biography of Johnson, would today be regarded a third- or fourth-tier figure in English literature, his highly readable journals perhaps never having found a publisher. Boswell's unrelenting sycophancy paid off handsomely for both men.

Those of us who know Samuel Johnson from Boswell's "Life" and the excellent biographies of him by Walter Jackson Bate and John Wain will encounter a familiar figure in Leo Damrosch's pages. Bulky, unkempt, with a laugh, as the bookseller Thomas Davies noted, "like a rhinoceros," Johnson suffered relentless tics and twitches. (Mr. Damrosch speculates that he may have been obsessive-compulsive). He had over a long life scrofula, nerve damage, asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, emphysema, gout, and more. Johnson was not everywhere admired. Neither Boswell's father nor his wife thought well of him, and the latter, apropos of her husband's relation with Johnson, remarked that "I have seen many a bear led by a man, but I never before saw a man led by a bear."

Johnson has been accused of speaking less for conversation than for victory. This alone might seem off-putting, were it not that nearly everything he is recorded to have said was so dazzlingly intelligent. He said that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money," yet he also said that "the only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it." His put-downs, in person or in print, were definitive. After praising "Paradise Lost," in his "Lives of the Poets," he added that "none ever wished it longer than it is." Of a minor and now forgotten poet named George Stepney, he concluded, in a remark perhaps even more useful when contemplating many of the swollen reputations of our day, "one cannot always find the reason for which the world has sometimes conspired to squander praise." Politically conservative, he said that "most schemes of political improvement are very laughable things."

Samuel Johnson was an orthodox Christian, Church of England, down the line. "For him," Leo Damrosch writes, "every one of the doctrines of Christianity was true, confirmed by the evidence recorded in the Bible and by later fathers of the Church. But that meant that the skepticism Johnson showed in every other context had to be firmly suppressed in this one." He was, more important to note, a genuinely good Christian, a man who took in desolate people off the streets and brought

them home to live with him for extended stays at his lodgings at Bolt Court. At the same time, he loathed infidels. He held David Hume's deism against him, and he never forgave his fellow clubman Gibbon his irreverent pages on the rise of Christianity in "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." (Mr. Damrosch defends Gibbon from the charge of being anti-Christian, noting that he much admired Jesus, but just didn't happen to believe he was the son of God.) When David Hume's professed serenity in death was reported to him by Boswell, Johnson responded that he, Hume, lied, saying that it was "so very improbable a thing" that a man should not be afraid of death, "of going into an unknown state and not being uneasy at leaving all that he knew." So vehement was his response that Boswell, in his "Life," remarks that "I seemed to myself like the man who had put his head into the lion's mouth a great many times with perfect safety, but at last had it bit off." Johnson, for all his wisdom and religious fervor, was terrified of death.

May 16, 1763, was the fateful day on which Boswell, then 22, met Samuel Johnson, who was 53. Johnson was already famous, Boswell aflame with unconcentrated ambition. Over the next 21 years of their relationship, the younger man would perfect the role of nudje, or relentless pest, bombarding Johnson with endless questions, goading him into conversation. On the subject of Johnson, Hester Thrale felt "curiosity carried Boswell farther than it ever carried any mortal breathing." In his biography of Johnson, John Wain wrote that "where ordinary bad taste leaves off, Boswell began."

Mr. Damrosch thinks Boswell may have been bipolar, and given his impressive mood swings, from dark depression to conquistadorial enthusiasm, alternately vastly insecure and brashly confident, he may well be right. A dandy in the realm of clothes, quite possibly an alcoholic, a whoremonger of some regularity, with two illegitimate children to his (dis)credit, Boswell is said to have suffered no fewer than 17 bouts of gonorrhoea. This and his drinking brought him to death, 11 years after Johnson, at the age of 54.

"Johnson insisted on reason and self-control," writes Mr. Damrosch, nicely capturing the boldface differences between the two men, "Boswell reveled in emotional 'sensibility' and seized gratifications whenever he could. Johnson aspired to what he called 'the grandeur of generality' and Boswell to specificity

and piquant details. Johnson crafted language in the carefully assembled building blocks of the periodic style, Boswell's style was conversational and free."

While Samuel Johnson and James Boswell are center stage in "The Club," Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, and David Garrick step in and out of the spotlight, chiefly in their relation to Johnson. Hester Thrale figures significantly, for giving Johnson safe harbor and sympathy at Streatham, her successful brewery-owner husband's country estate, where he wrote "Lives of the Poets," his greatest work. Johnson's comments on his contemporaries are often generous. Of Oliver Goldsmith, who was not especially well-spoken, Johnson said: "No man was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had." Apart from Joshua Reynolds's heavy boozing, Johnson found no flaws in him, and Boswell reports that Johnson told him that "Sir Joshua Reynolds was the most invulnerable man he knew, the man with whom if you should quarrel, you would find the most difficulty how to abuse."

Johnson was unreserved in his admiration for Edmund Burke's intellect—"you could not stand five minutes with that man beneath a shed while it rained," he said, "but you must be convinced you had been standing with the greatest man you had ever yet seen"—but he deplored Burke's penchant for puns. He called Adam Smith "as dull a dog as he had ever met with," but then Smith was in religion a deist, and Johnson felt deism a grievous error. "Johnson was a moralist, reflecting on how people ought to act," as Mr. Damrosch notes; "Smith was a social scientist, analyzing how they did act." In his "Dictionary," Johnson defined a moralist as "one who teaches the duties of life."

"The Club" is filled with interesting oddments. In its pages we learn, for example, that David Garrick, the actor of the age, was five feet three inches tall and not especially good-looking. That Hester Thrale's husband Henry died, at 52, of "gluttony." That the word "unclubbable," to describe an unsociable person, was first applied, by Johnson, to Sir John Hawkins, a solicitor and an original Club member who later wrote a biography of Johnson. That Johnson, along with sheltering a ragtag lot of lost human beings in his lodgings, kept a cat named Hodge. Then there are the illustrations, 31 elegant color plates and numerous black-and-white drawings of the book's dramatis personae scattered throughout this splendid book.

Reading "The Club" and about its illustrious members,

one cannot help wondering if a similar institution were possible in our country in our day. I have tried to imagine it, but, across the breadth of our vast land, can come up with only three possible members, first among them, of course, myself.

Mr. Epstein is the author, most recently, of “Charm: The Elusive Enchantment” and “The Ideal of Culture: Essays.”