



Aberdeen Introductions to Irish and Scottish Culture: James Boswell (2007)

series volume by Murray Pittock

James Boswell (1740-95) has gone down in history as the biographer of Samuel Johnson, a sexual adventurer, a toadying Scot, and as a writer who typified the divided consciousness of the Scottish eighteenth century. Before the discovery and (since 1950) publication of his private papers, critics often saw him as a bit of a fool, whose achievement was primarily that of being lucky enough to be the friend and amanuensis of the most famous Englishman of his day. More recently, the stature of Boswell's achievement and his complexity as a writer have been better appreciated, but without adequate understanding of his role as a specifically Scottish author and thinker of the age of Enlightenment: in particular, his anxious critique of Humean scepticism is discussed here. This study examines, through a close reading of both published and unpublished materials, how Boswell deliberately sets out to write ambiguously about himself and the major events of his time; how, far from echoing Johnson, Boswell improves on his sayings and teasingly criticizes him; and how Boswell's political and religious sympathies with Jacobitism, Scotland and Catholicism coloured the way in which he understood his own, and his country's, uncertain place in the new world of British imperial opportunity.

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