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—Thomas Jefferson

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REVIEWS

Boswell Gets His Due

by [Allen Mendenhall](#) | Posted June 22, 2015

What is Enlightenment? The title of Immanuel Kant's most famous essay asks that question. Kant suggests that the historical Enlightenment was mankind's release from his self-incurred tutelage, an intellectual awakening that opened up new freedoms by challenging implanted prejudices and ingrained presuppositions. "Sapere aude!" Kant declared. "Dare to be wise!"

Tradition maintains that the Enlightenment was an 18th-century social and cultural phenomenon emanating from Paris salons, an Age of Reason that championed the primacy of the individual, the individual's competence to pursue knowledge through rational and empirical methods, though skepticism and the scientific method. Discourse, debate, experimentation, and economic liberalism would liberate society from the shackles of superstition and dogma and enable unlimited progress and technological innovation, offering fresh insights into the universal laws that governed not only the natural world but also human relations. They would also enable individual people to attain fresh insights into themselves.

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Boswell was a garrulous charmer with Bacchanalian tendencies, and a fussy hypochondriac raised Calvinist and forever anxious, perhaps obsessive, about the uncertain state of his eternal soul.

Robert Zaretsky, a history professor at the University of Houston and the author of *Boswell's Enlightenment*, spares us tiresome critiques or defenses of the Enlightenment by Foucault and Habermas and their progeny. He begins his biography of James Boswell, the great 18th-century biographer, with a historiographical essay on the trends and trajectories of the pertinent scholarship. He points out that the Enlightenment may have begun earlier than people once believed, and in England rather than France. He mentions Jonathan Israel's suggestion that we look to Spinoza and company, not Voltaire and company, to understand the Enlightenment, and that too much work has focused on the influence of affluent thinkers, excluding lower-class proselytizers who spread the message of liberty with a fearsome frankness and fervor. And he maintains that Scotland was the ideational epicenter of Enlightenment. Boswell was a Scot.

All of this is academic backdrop and illustrative posturing, a setting of the stage for Zaretsky's subject, Boswell, a lawyer and man of letters with an impressive pedigree and a nervous disposition, a garrulous charmer with Bacchanalian tendencies, and a fussy hypochondriac raised Calvinist and forever anxious, perhaps obsessive, about the uncertain state of his eternal soul. He marveled at public executions, which he attended regularly. He also had daddy issues, always trying to please his displeased father, Lord Auchinleck, who instructed his son to pursue the law rather than the theater and thespians. When word arrived that his son had been sharing his private journals with the public, Lord Auchinleck

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son had been sharing his private journals with the public, Lord Auchinleck

threatened to disown the young James.

Astounded by the beauty and splendor of Rome and entranced by Catholicism, Boswell was never able to untangle the disparate religious influences (all of them Christian) that he picked up during his travels. He was equally unable to suppress *eros* and consequently caught sexual diseases as a frog catches flies.

Although the *Life of Johnson* is always considered one of the most important books in the language, Boswell himself has been relegated to the second or third tier of the British literary canon.

Geography and culture shaped Boswell's ideas and personality and frame Zaretsky's narrative. "With the European continent to one side, Edinburgh to the other," Zaretsky intones, "James Boswell stood above what seemed the one and the same phenomenon: the Enlightenment." This remark is both figurative and literal, concluding Zaretsky's account of Boswell's climbing of Arthur's Seat, a summit overlooking Edinburgh, and his triumphant shout, "Voltaire, Rousseau, immortal names!"

Immortal names indeed. But would Boswell himself achieve immortality? Boswell achieved fame for his biography of Samuel Johnson, the poet, critic, essayist, and wit — who except for one chapter is oddly ancillary to Zaretsky's narrative.

Although the *Life of Johnson* is always considered one of the most important books in the language, Boswell himself has been relegated to the second or third tier of the British literary canon and treated, poor chap, as a celebrity-seeking minor figure who specialized in the life of a major figure. If Dr. Johnson is Batman,

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Boswell is a hobnobbing, flattering Robin.

Boswell's friends have fared better — countrymen and mentors such as Adam Smith and David Hume, for instance, and the continental luminaries Voltaire and Rousseau. But there are many interesting relationships here. To cite only one: Thérèse Levasseur, Rousseau's wife or mistress (a topic of debate), became Boswell's lover as he accompanied her from Paris to England. The unsuspecting Rousseau, exiled in England, waited eagerly for her arrival, while a more astute Hume, who was Rousseau's host, recognized matters for what they were.

Zaretsky believes Boswell was an exceptional talent, notwithstanding his weaknesses, and certainly worthy of our attention. Glossing several periods of Boswell's life but closely examining his grand tour of the Continent (1763–1765), Zaretsky elevates Boswell's station, repairs Boswell's literary reputation, and corrects a longstanding underestimation, calling attention to his complicated and curious relationship to the Enlightenment, a movement or milieu that engulfed him without necessarily defining him.

The title of the book assumes plural meaning: Boswell attained a self-enlightenment that reflected the ethos and ethic of his era.

Zaretsky's large claims for his subject might seem belied by the author's professedly modest goal: "to place Boswell's tour of the Continent, and situate the churn of his mind, against the intellectual and political backdrop of the Enlightenment." To this end, Zaretsky remarks, "James Boswell and the Enlightenment are as complex as the coils of wynds and streets forming the old town of Edinburgh." And so they are, as Zaretsky makes manifest in ten digestible

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chapters bristling with the animated, ambulatory prose of the old style of literary and historical criticism, the kind that English professors disdain but educated readers enjoy and appreciate.

Zaretsky marshals his evidence from Boswell's meticulously detailed missives and journals, piecing together a fluid tale of adventure (meetings with the exiled libertine John Wilkes, evenings with prostitutes, debauchery across Europe, and lots of drinking) and resultant misadventure (aimlessness, dishonor, bouts of gonorrhea and depression, and religious angst). Zaretsky portrays Boswell as a habitual performer, a genteel, polite, and proud socialite who judged himself as he imagined others to have judged him. He suffered from melancholy and the clap, among other things, but he also cultivated a gentlemanly air and pursued knowledge for its own sake. The title of the book, *Boswell's Enlightenment*, assumes plural meaning: Boswell attained a self-enlightenment that reflected the ethos and ethic of his era.

Zaretsky's book matters because Boswell matters, and, in Zaretsky's words, "Boswell matters not because his mind was as original or creative as the men and women he pursued, but because his struggle to make sense of his life, to bend his person to certain philosophical ends, appeals to our own needs and sensibilities." We see ourselves in Boswell, in his alternating states of faith and doubt, devotion and reason. He, like so many of us, sought to improve himself daily but could never live up to his own expectations. He's likeable because he's fallible, a pious sinner who did right in the name of wrong and wrong in the name of right, but without any ill intent. A neurotic, rotten mess, he couldn't control his libido and didn't learn from his mistakes. But he could write like the wind, and we're better off because he did. He knew all of us, strangely, without having known us. God help us, we're all like him in some way.

Editor's Note: *Review of "Boswell's Enlightenment," by Robert Zaretsky.*

The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2015, 269 pages.

About this Author

Allen Mendenhall is the author of *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism*. His website is AllenMendenhall.com.



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