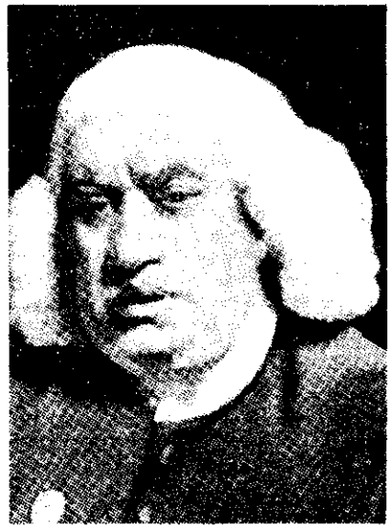
BOOKS

Samuel Johnson's Pen

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON, collected and edited by R. W. Chapman: Geoffrey Cumberlege: Oxford University Press, 3 vols. English price, £6 6/-.

(Reviewed by M.H.H.)



SAMUEL JOHNSON
A great and good man

THESE three volumes have been prepared in many years of patient and self-effacing work, enlivened for the editor by the rewards and discoveries of literary detection. They are built into the structure raised in 1892 by Birkbeck Hill's *Letters of Samuel Johnson*. New material—and there is much of it—has been brought into Hill's framework. Letters which now come between entries numbered by the previous editor have been suitably indicated. In this way the reference value of earlier editions is undisturbed, and the reader is given an easy method of recognising what is new.

The most important part of Dr. Chapman's work, however, has been his effort to reach an accurate text. Wherever possible, he has examined the originals, or photographs. He has found many erasures by Mrs. Thrale — that rather giddy-minded woman—and has succeeded often in recovering the missing words. His discoveries and frustrations are recorded in footnotes, some of which may seem trivial to impatient readers; but they should not be passed over, for frequently the information and comment bring one a little closer to Johnson.

The reader for whom these pages are intended should not be alarmed by editorial apparatus, though sometimes he may wonder if so many indexes were necessary, or if some of the abbreviations could not have been a little less cryptic. But Dr. Chapman can afford to be unruffled. His clues, footnotes and indexes are there for those who want them (and scholars will study them gratefully for many years); but the letters stand on their own, and may be enjoyed without descending to finer print at the bottom of the page. How do they stand up to so much critical attention?

They would have very little interest for people who used them as an introduction to Johnson. Apart from the long letters sent to Mrs. Thrale during the tour of Scotland, which obviously were written with an eye on the book that was to grow out of them ("I hope my mistress keeps all my very long letters"), and a few famous documents — the letter to Chesterfield, for instance, and the stinging reply to Macpherson — Johnson seldom wrote with any thought of an audience. Much of the detail was important only when it was written down, and not always then. Johnson was never a willing or verbose correspondent: if he had lived later he would have been thankful for the telephone. He wrote because he wanted to ask a favour for someone else, because he needed books or information, because he was involved in transactions with booksellers, because he had to offer congratulation or sympathy, because he was anxious about the health of Hill Boothby ("My sweet angel"), Lucy Porter, Hester and Henry Thrale, and their children.

He was at his worst when he felt obliged to pay compliments. Although he was merely conforming to the manner of his times, the flattery sounds oddly in sentences more suitable for an address to a senate than to a lady of rank and fashion. His letters to Queeney, daughter of Mrs. Thrale, have been much liked for their tenderness; and indeed there is no starch in his prose when he unbends to his "dearest miss," even though he seldom fails to throw in some moral precepts. But he is at his best when energy and sympathy have been aroused by some crisis in the life of a friend. His letters to John Taylor on the breaking up of a marriage are full of support and sound sense; and when he writes to Dr. Dodd, condemned to be hanged for forgery, he is anxious to work for a reprieve, but equally anxious that "the unfortunate divine" should not build upon false hopes.

Johnson was completely honest on such occasions: he would say what he believed to be true or possible, but no more; and it is hard to believe that the strength of the man, and his wisdom, could fail to lift up the spirits of the afflicted. He could be impatient, especially with Boswell, whose complaints of neglect, little stratagems, and sighing references to black humours must sometimes have been hard to bear; but he was also affectionate, even playful, and clearly a man to be loved.

Many of these letters are familiar to readers of Boswell, whose book is still the best way of meeting Johnson. In their full context, however, and without

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DIVERSITY will be the keynote of ZB Book Review on April 19. Christine Cole is to speak about "The New You and Heredity," by Amram Scheinfeld; "Illyrian Venture," by Brigadier "Trotsky" Davies, is to be reviewed by Oliver A. Gillespie, and "Adlai Stevenson, the Man and the Statesman," by John Bartlow Martin, will be reviewed by Russell Palmer. Dr. Angus Ross, whose picture appears here, is to discuss "Gods, Graves, and Scholars," by C. W. Ceram.