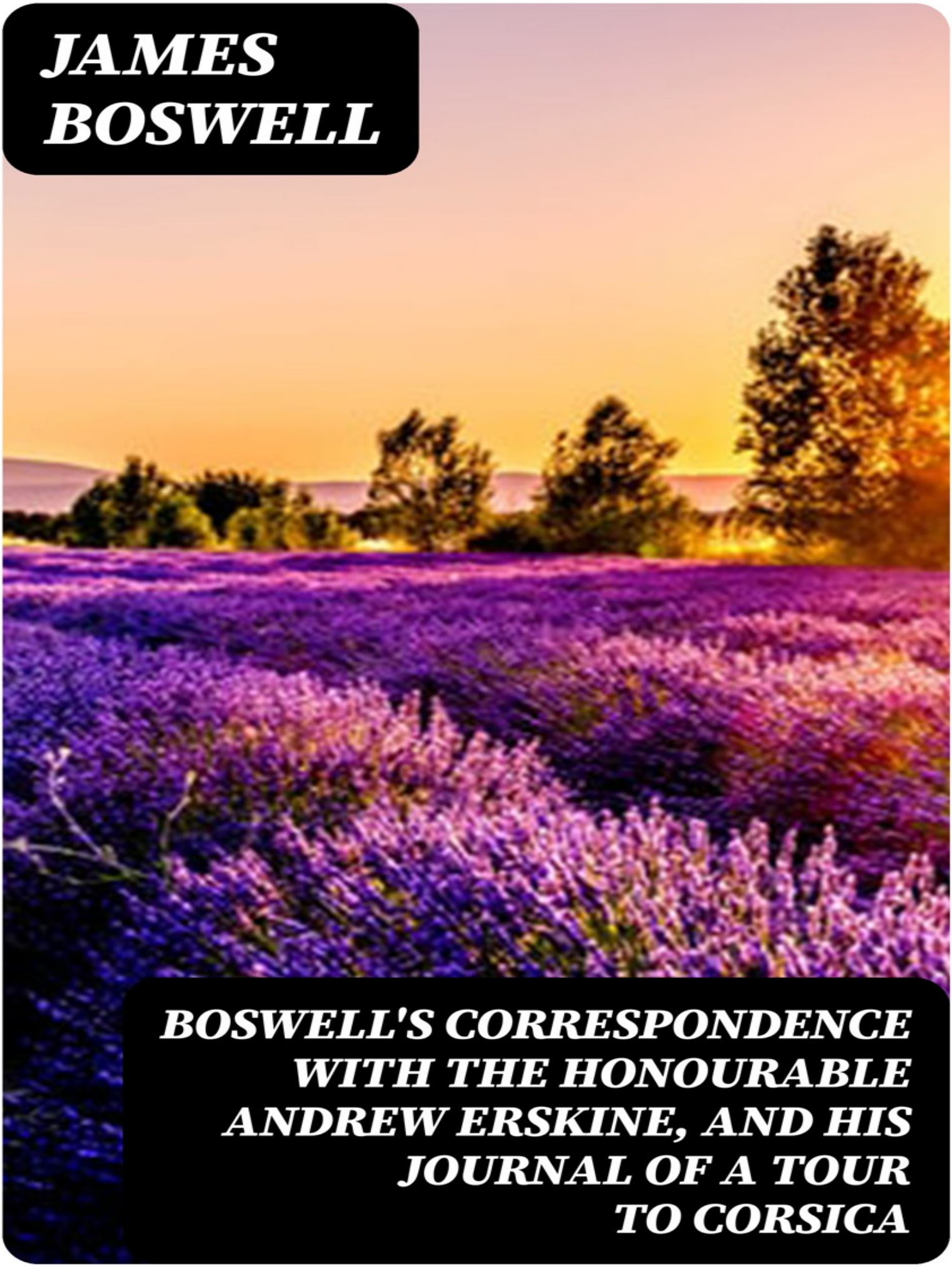
JAMES BOSWELL



BOSWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE HONOURABLE ANDREW ERSKINE, AND HIS JOURNAL OF A TOUR TO CORSICA

James Boswell

Boswell's Correspondence with the Honourable Andrew Erskine, and His Journal of a Tour to Corsica

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PREFACE.

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Boswell did not bring out his "Life of Johnson" till he was past his fiftieth year. His "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides" had appeared more than five years earlier. While it is on these two books that his fame rests, yet to the men of his generation he was chiefly known for his work on Corsica and for his friendship with Paoli. His admiration for Johnson he had certainly proclaimed far and wide. He had long been off, in the words of his father, "wi' the land-louping scoundrel of a Corsican, and had pinned himself to a dominie—an auld dominie who keeped a schule and cau'd it an acaadamy." Nevertheless it was to Corsica and its heroic chief that he owed the position that he undoubtedly held among men of letters. He was Corsica Boswell and Paoli Boswell long before he became famous as Johnson Boswell.

It has been shown elsewhere[1] what a spirited thing it was in this young Scotchman to make his way into an island, the interior of which no traveller from this country had ever before visited. The Mediterranean still swarmed with Turkish corsairs, while Corsica itself was in a very unsettled condition. It had been computed that, till Paoli took the rule and held it with a firm hand, the state had lost no less than 800 subjects every year by assassination. Boswell, as he

tells us in his Journal, had been warned by an officer of rank in the British Navy, who had visited several of the ports, of the risk he ran to his life in going among these "barbarians." Moreover a state of hostility existed between the Corsicans and the Republic of Genoa—which, the year before Boswell's visit, had obtained the assistance of France. The interior of the island was still held by Paoli, but many of the seaport towns were garrisoned by the French and the Genoese. At the time of Boswell's visit war was not being actively carried on, for the French commander had been instructed merely to secure these points, and not to undertake offensive operations against the natives. From the Journal that Boswell gives, we see that when once he had landed he ran no risks; but it is not every young man who, when out on his travels, leaves the safe and beaten round to go into a country that is almost unknown, and to prove to others that there also safety is to be found. With good reason did Johnson write to him—"Come home and expect such welcome as is due to him whom a wise and noble curiosity has led where perhaps no native of this country ever was before." With scarcely less reason did Paoli say, "A man come from Corsica will be like a man come from the Antipodes."

How strongly his journey and his narrative touched the hearts of people at home may still be read in Mrs. Barbauld's fine lines on Corsica:—

> "Such were the working thoughts which
> swelled the breast
> Of generous Boswell; when with nobler aim
> And views beyond the narrow beaten track
> By trivial fancy trod, he turned his course

From polished Gallia's soft delicious vales,
From the grey reliques of imperial Rome,
From her long galleries of laureled stone,
Her chiseled heroes and her marble gods,
Whose dumb majestic pomp yet awes the world,
To animated forms of patriot zeal;
Warm in the living majesty of virtue;
Elate with fearless spirit; firm; resolved;
By fortune nor subdued; nor awed by power."
[2]

Gray was moved greatly by the account given of Paoli. "He is a man," he wrote, "born two thousand years after his time." Horace Walpole had written to beg him to read the book. "What relates to Paoli," he said, "will amuse you much." What merely amused Walpole "moved" Gray "strangely." It moved others besides him. Subscriptions were raised for the Corsicans, and money and arms were sent to them from this country. Boswell writes to tell his friend Temple—"I have hopes that our Government will interfere. In the meantime, by a private subscription in Scotland, I am sending this week £700 worth of ordnance." Other subscriptions were forwarded which Paoli, as is told in a letter from him published in the "Gentleman's Magazine,"[3] "applied to the support of the families of those patriots who, abhorring a foreign yoke, have abandoned their houses and estates in that part of the country held by the enemy, and have retired to join our army."

Boswell's work met with a rapid sale. The copyright he sold to Dilly for one hundred guineas. The publisher must have made no small gain by the bargain, for a third edition was called for within a year. "My book," writes Boswell, "has

amazing celebrity: Lord Lyttelton, Mr. Walpole, Mrs. Macaulay, Mr. Garrick have all written me noble letters about it." With his Lordship's letter he was so much delighted that in the third edition he obtained leave to use it to "enrich" his book. Johnson pronounced his Journal in a very high degree curious and delightful. It is surprising that a work which thus delighted Johnson, moved Gray strangely, and amused Horace Walpole, can now be met with only in old libraries and on the shelves of a dealer in second-hand books. I doubt whether a new edition has been published in the last hundred years. It is still more surprising when we remember that it is the work of an author who has written a book "that is likely to be read as long as the English exists, either as a living or as a dead language." The explanation of this, I take it, is to be found in the distinction that Johnson draws between Boswell's Account of Corsica, which forms more than two-thirds of the whole book, and the Journal of his Tour. His history, he said, was like other histories. It was copied from books. His Journal rose out of his own experience and observation. His history was read, and perhaps read with eagerness, because at the time when it appeared there was a strong interest felt in the Corsicans. In despair of maintaining their independence, they had been willing to place themselves and their island entirely under the protection of Great Britain. The offer had been refused, but they still hoped for our assistance. Not a few Englishmen felt with Lord Lyttelton when he wrote—"I wish with you that our Government had shown more respect for Corsican liberty, and I think it disgraces our nation that we do not live in good friendship with a brave people engaged

in the noblest of all contests, a contest against tyranny." But in such a contest as this Corsica was before long to play a different part. Scarcely four years after Boswell from some distant hill "had a fine view of Ajaccio and its environs," that town was rendered famous by the birth of Napoleon Buonaparte.

With whatever skill Boswell's history had been compiled it could not have lived. There were not, indeed, the materials out of which a history that should last could have been formed. The whole island boasted of but one printing press and one bookseller's shop. The feuds and wars of the wild islanders might have lived in the songs of the poet, but were little fit for the purposes of the historian. He who attempts to write the history of such a people is almost forced to accept tradition for fact, and to believe in their Arthurs and their Tells. The Corsicans are, indeed, from time to time found in one or other of the great tracks of European history. As Boswell says, their island had belonged to the Phœnicians, the Etruscans, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Goths, and the Saracens. It had been conquered by France, and had been made a gift from that kingdom to the Pope. It had been given by the Pope to the Pisans, and from them had passed to the Republic of Genoa. It had undergone strange and rapid revolutions, but they were those common revolutions that befall a wild race that lives in the midst of powerful neighbours.

Boswell, unsurpassed though he is as a biographer, admirable as he is as a writer of a Journal, yet had little of the stuff out of which an historian is made. His compilation is a creditable performance for a young man who had but

lately returned home from his travels. It certainly adds nothing to the reputation of the author of the "Life of Johnson." But while it lies overwhelmed with deserved neglect, it ought not to drag down with it the Journal of his Tour. That portion of the work is lively, is interesting, and is brief. It can be read with pleasure now, as it was read with pleasure when it first appeared. But, besides this, it is interesting to us as the early work of a writer whose mind has been a puzzle to men of letters. Even should we accept Macaulay's judgment on Boswell, and despise him as he despises him, yet it must surely be worth while to examine closely the early writings of an author, who has, "in an important department of literature, immeasurably surpassed such writers as Tacitus, Clarendon, Alfieri, and his own idol Johnson."[4] This Journal is like the youthful sketch of some great artist. It exhibits the merits which, later on, distinguished, in so high a degree the mature writer.

Together with the "Journal of a Tour to Corsica," I am reprinting a volume of letters that passed between Boswell and his friend The Honourable Andrew Erskine. Lively and amusing though they often are, yet I should not have proposed to republish them did not they throw almost as much light on Boswell's character as the Journal throws light on his powers as a writer. In his account of Corsica, there is a passage in which, while describing the historian Petrus Cyrnaeus, he at the same time describes himself. "The fourth book of Petrus Cyrnaeus," he says, "is entirely taken up with an account of his own wretched vagabond life, full of strange, whimsical anecdotes. He begins it very gravely: 'Quoniam ad hunc locum perventum est, non alienum

videtur de Petri qui haec scripsit vita et moribus proponere.' 'Since we are come thus far it will not be amiss to say something of the life and manners of Petrus, who writeth this history.' He gives a very excellent character of himself, and, I dare say, a very faithful one. But so minute is his narration, that he takes care to inform posterity that he was very irregular in his method of walking, and that he preferred sweet wine to hard. In short, he was a man of considerable parts, with a great simplicity and oddity of character."

To the simplicity and oddity of character that Boswell shared with this learned historian, there was certainly added not a little impudence. It was an impudence that was lively and amusing; but none the less was it downright impudence. We are amazed at the audacity with which two young men ventured to publish to the world the correspondence which had passed between them when they were scarcely of age. In fact, the earlier letters were written when Boswell was but twenty. Their justification only increases their offence. "Curiosity," they say, "is the most prevalent of all our passions; and the curiosity for reading letters, is the most prevalent of all kinds of curiosity. Had any man in the three kingdoms found the following letters, directed, sealed, and adorned with postmarks,—provided he could have done it honestly—he would have read every one of them." There is this, however, that makes us always look with a certain indulgence on Boswell. He never plays the hypocrite. He likes praise, he likes to be talked about, he likes to know great people, and he no more cares to conceal his likings than Sancho Panza cared to conceal his appetite.

Three pullets and a couple of geese were but so much scum, which Don Quixote's squire whipped off to stay his stomach till dinner-time. By the time Boswell was six-and-twenty he could boast that he had made the acquaintance of Adam Smith, Robertson, Hume, Johnson, Goldsmith, Wilkes, Garrick, Horace Walpole, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Paoli. He had twice at least received a letter from the Earl of Chatham. But his appetite for knowing great men could never be satisfied. These might stay his stomach for a while, but more would be presently wanted. At the time when he published this volume of Letters he seems to have had some foresight into his future life. "I am thinking," he says, "of the intimacies which I shall form with the learned and ingenious in every science, and of the many amusing literary anecdotes which I shall pick up." When fame did come upon him by his book on Corsica, no one could have relished it more. "I am really the *great man* now," he writes to his friend Temple. "I have had David Hume in the forenoon, and Mr. Johnson in the afternoon of the same day visiting me. Sir John Pringle, Dr. Franklin, and some more company dined with me to-day; and Mr. Johnson and General Oglethorpe one day, Mr. Garrick alone another, and David Hume and some more *literati* another, dine with me next week. I give admirable dinners and good claret; and the moment I go abroad again, which will be in a day or two, I set up my chariot. This is enjoying the fruit of my labours, and appearing like the friend of Paoli.... David Hume came on purpose the other day to tell me that the Duke of Bedford was very fond of my book, and had recommended it to the Duchess."

In the preface to the third edition, he says,—"When I first ventured to send my book into the world, I fairly owned an ardent desire for literary fame. I have obtained my desire: and whatever clouds may overcast my days, I can now walk here among the rocks and woods of my ancestors, with an agreeable consciousness that I have done something worthy." It was about this time that, writing to the great Earl of Chatham, he said—"I can labour hard; I feel myself coming forward, and I hope to be useful to my country. Could your Lordship find time to honour me now and then with a letter? I have been told how favourably your Lordship has spoken of me. To correspond with a Paoli and a Chatham, is enough to keep a young man ever ardent in the pursuit of virtuous fame."[5]

A few months before his account of Corsica was published, he had fixed upon the date of its publication as the period when he should steadily begin that pursuit of virtuous fame, which now was to be secured by correspondence with a Paoli and a Chatham. "I am always for fixing some period," he wrote, "for my perfection, as far as possible. Let it be when my account of Corsica is published; I shall then have a character which I must support." Unhappily the time for his perfection was again and again put off. Johnson, in speaking of Derrick, said —"Derrick may do very well, as long as he can outrun his character; but the moment his character gets up with him, it is all over." With Boswell, just the opposite was the case. He soon acquired a character—a character which he was bound to support. But he could never get up with it. The friend of Paoli, the friend of Johnson, was, unhappily, given to drink.

The gay spirits and lively health of youth supported him for a while; but, even in these early days, he was too often troubled with that depression of spirit which follows on a debauch. But, as time passed on, and the habit grew stronger upon him, his health began to give way, and his cheerfulness of mind to desert him. He lived but four years after the publication of his great work.

In the preface to the second edition of the "Life of Johnson" he shows his delight in his fame. "There are some men, I believe, who have, or think they have, a very small share of vanity. Such may speak of their literary fame in a decorous state of diffidence. But I confess that I am so formed by nature and by habit, that to restrain the effusion of delight on having obtained such fame, to me would be truly painful. Why, then, should I suppress it? Why, 'out of the abundance of the heart,' should I not speak?" This preface bears the date of July 1, 1793. Only ten days earlier he had written to tell Temple how he had been drinking, and had been robbed. "The robbery is only of a few shillings; but the cut on my head and bruises on my arms were sad things, and confined me to bed in pain, and fever, and helplessness, as a child, many days.... This shall be a crisis in my life: I trust I shall henceforth be a sober, regular man. Indeed, my indulgence in wine has, of late years especially, been excessive.... Your suggestion as to my being carried off in a state of intoxication, is awful. I thank you for it, my dear friend. It impressed me much, I assure you." It was too late in life to form resolutions. A year later he was again "resolved anew to be upon his guard." In the May of 1795, he died, after an illness of great suffering. To him might be

applied some of the lines which the great poet who lived so near him wrote as his own epitaph:—

> "He keenly felt the friendly glow,
> And softer flame;
> But thoughtless follies laid him low,
> And stain'd his name."

Boswell had, indeed, but little of that "prudent, cautious, self-control," which, as Burns tells us, "is wisdom's root." It is a sad thought that at the very same time the two most famous writers that Ayrshire can boast, men whose homes were but a few miles apart, were at the same time drinking themselves to death. Burns outlived Boswell little more than a year.

Boswell was fifty-four years old when he died. Greatly as he relished wine, he relished fame still more. He had worked hard for fame, and he had fairly earned it; but in its full flush his intemperance swept him away. There can be little question that his first triumph in the field of letters, his book on Corsica brought him far greater pleasure than his "Life of Johnson," by which his name will live. Perhaps the happiest day in his life was when, at the Shakespeare Jubilee, he entered the amphitheatre in the dress of a Corsican chief. "On the front of his cap was embroidered, in gold letters, "*Viva la Libertà*," and on the side of it was a handsome blue feather and cockade, so that it had an elegant as well as a warlike appearance." "So soon as he came into the room," says the account in the "London Magazine," written, no doubt, by himself, "he drew universal attention." The applause that his "Life of Johnson" brought him was, no doubt, far greater, but then, as I have said, his health was

breaking, and his fine spirits were impaired. He who would know Boswell at his happiest—when he was, as Hume described him, very good humoured, very agreeable, and very mad, must read his volume of Letters, and the Journals of his Tours to Corsica and the Hebrides.

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THE HONOURABLE

ANDREW ERSKINE,

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A N D

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JAMES BOSWELL, Esq;

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CURIOSITY is the most prevalent of all our passions; and the curiosity for reading letters, is the most prevalent of all kinds of curiosity. Had any man in the three Kingdoms found the following letters, directed, sealed, and adorned with postmarks,—provided he could have done it honestly—he would have read every one of them; or, had they been ushered into the world, from Mr. Flexney's shop, in that manner, they would have been bought up with the greatest avidity. As they really once had all the advantages of concealment, we hope their present more conspicuous form will not tend to diminish their merit. They have made ourselves laugh; we hope they will have the same effect upon other people.

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[In a Memoir of James Boswell,[6] by the Rev. Charles Rogers, a short account is given of the Hon. Andrew Erskine, Boswell's correspondent. He was the youngest son of Alexander, fifth Earl of Kellie. He served in the army for some years. After his retirement he settled at Edinburgh. "His habits were regular, but he indulged occasionally at cards, and was partial to the game of whist. Having sustained a serious loss at his favourite pastime, he became

frantic, and threw himself into the Forth and perished." Burns, writing to his friend Thomson, October, 1793, says—"Your last letter, my dear Thomson, was indeed laden with heavy news. Alas, poor Erskine! The recollection that he was a coadjutor in your publication has, till now, scared me from writing to you, or turning my thoughts on composing for you." "He was," adds Dr. Rogers, "of a tall, portly form, and to the last wore gaiters and a flapped vest." By this last description Dr. Rogers's readers may be pleasantly reminded of an anecdote that is given for the first time, I believe, in his book. "Dr. Johnson used to laugh at a passage in Carte's 'Life of the Duke of Ormond,' where he gravely observed that 'he was always in full dress when he went to Court; too many being in the practice of going thither with double lapells.'" As poor Erskine "wore to the last his gaiters and a flapped vest," no doubt he had them on when he drowned himself.—Ed.]

LETTER I.

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Auchinleck, Aug. 25, 1761.

Dear Erskine,—No ceremony, I beseech you. Give me your hand. How is my honest Captain Andrew? How goes it with the elegant gentle Lady A——? the lovely sighing Lady J——? and how, O how does that glorious luminary Lady B—— do? You see I retain my usual volatility. The Boswells, you know, came over from Normandy, with William the Conqueror, and

some of us possess the spirit of our ancestors the French. I do for one. A pleasant spirit it is. *Vive la Bagatelle*, is the maxim. A light heart may bid defiance to fortune. And yet, Erskine, I must tell you, that I have been a little pensive of late, amorously pensive, and disposed to read Shenstone's Pastoral on Absence, the tenderness and simplicity of which I greatly admire. A man who is in love is like a man who has got the tooth-ache, he feels most acute pain while nobody pities him. In that situation am I at present: but well do I know that I will not be long so. So much for inconstancy. As this is my first epistle to you, it cannot in decency be a long one. Pray write to me soon. Your letters, I prophecy, will entertain me not a little; and will besides be extremely serviceable in many important respects. They will supply me with oil to my lamps, grease to my wheels, and blacking to my shoes. They will furnish me with strings to my fiddle, lashes to my whip, lining to my breeches, and buttons to my coat. They will make charming spurs, excellent knee buckles, and inimitable watch-keys. In short, while they last I shall neither want breakfast, dinner, nor supper. I shall keep a couple of horses, and I shall sleep upon a bed of down. I shall be in France this year, and in Spain the next; with many other particulars too tedious to mention. You may take me in a metaphorical sense; but I would rather choose to be understood literally.

I am

Your most affectionate friend,

JAMES BOSWELL.

LETTER II.

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Kelly, Sept. 11, 1761.

HAIL! mighty Boswell! at thy awful name
The fainting muse relumes her sinking flame.
Behold how high the tow'ring blaze aspires,
While fancy's waving pinions fan my fires!
Swells the full song? it swells alone from thee;
Some spark of thy bright genius kindles me!
"But softly, Sir," I hear you cry,
"This wild bombast is rather dry:
I hate your d—n'd insipid song,
That sullen stalks in lines so long;
Come, give us short ones like to Butler,
Or, like our friend Auchinleck[7] the cutler."
A Poet, Sir, whose fame is to support,
Must ne'er write verses tripping pert and short:
Who ever saw a judge himself disgrace,
By trotting to the bench with hasty pace?
I swear, dear Sir, you're really in the wrong;
To make a line that's good, I say, James, make it long.

You see, Sir, I have quite the best of the argument; and indeed I was determined not to give it up, till you acknowledged yourself vanquished; so to verse I go again, tooth and nail.

How well you talk of glory and the guards,
Of fighting heroes, and their great rewards!
Our eyes behold you glow with martial flame,
Our ears attend the never-ceasing theme.
Fast from your tongue the rousing accents

flow,
And horror darkens on your sable brow!
We hear the thunder of the rolling war,
And see red vict'ry shouting from her car!

You kindly took me up, an awkward cub,
And introduced me to the Soaping-Club;[8]
Where ev'ry Tuesday eve our ears are blest
With genuine humour, and with genuine jest:
The voice of mirth ascends the list'ning sky,
While, "soap his own beard, every man," you cry.
Say, who could e'er indulge a yawn or nap,
When Barclay roars forth snip, and Bainbridge snap?[9]
Tell me how I your favours may return;
With thankfulness and gratitude I burn.
I've one advice, oh! take it I implore!
Search out America's untrodden shore;
There seek some vast Savannah rude and wild,
Where Europe's sons of slaughter never smil'd,
With fiend-like arts, insidious to betray
The sooty natives as a lawful prey.
At you th' astonish'd savages shall stare,
And hail you as a God, and call you fair:
Your blooming beauty shall unrivall'd shine,
And Captain Andrew's whiteness yield to thine.[10]

In reality, I'm under vast obligations to you. It was you who first made me thoroughly sensible (indeed I very readily believed it) of the excellencies of my own Poetry; and about that time, I made two wonderful discoveries, to wit, that you

was a sensible man, and that I was a good poet; discoveries which I dare say are yet doubted by some incredulous people. Boswell, I shall not praise your letter, because I know you have an aversion at being thought a genius, or a wit. The reluctance with which you always repeat your Cub, [11] and the gravity of countenance which you always assume upon that occasion, are convincing proofs of this assertion. You hate flattery, too, but in spite of your teeth I must tell you, that you are the best Poet, and the most humorous letter-writer I know; and that you have a finer complexion, and dance better than any man of my acquaintance. For my part, I actually think you would make an excellent champion at the approaching coronation.[12] What though malevolent critics may say you are too little, yet you are a Briareus in comparison of Tydeus the hero of Statius's Thebais; and if he was not a warrior, then am I, Andrew Erskine, Lieutenant in the 71st regiment, blind of one eye, hump-backed, and lame in both legs. We all tired so much of the Highlands, that we had not been there three weeks before we all came away again. Lady B—— is gone a-visiting, and the rest of us are come to Kelly. It was most unaccountable in me to leave New-Tarbat; for nowhere will you meet with such fine ingredients for poetical description. However, we are all going back again when Mr. M—— comes from London; so some time in October you may expect a most cordial invitation. This is all at present (according to the simple but eloquent expression of the vulgar) from your sincere friend,

ANDREW ERSKINE.