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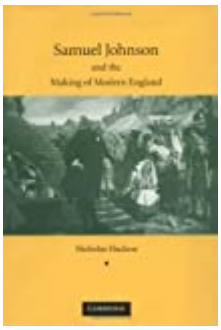


**Nicholas Hudson.** *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. ix + 290 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83125-3.

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## Literature and the Appeal to Historical Contexts

Nicholas Hudson is best known to Johnson scholars for his careful and learned monograph *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (1988), and has devoted as much time and effort to the present volume, some of it echoing five articles that he has published on related themes since that date.

His search for historical contexts is intended as an alternative to psychoanalytical and deconstructionist approaches. He begins with an admirable manifesto: even where other scholars have sought to locate Johnson in his time, their "aim has been less to understand Johnson within the cultural developments of his own age than to justify his canonical status in the context of the currently prevailing morality of the Anglo-American academy. According to a certain implicit assumption, Johnson must be recovered as acceptable according to *our* values as a socially progressive thinker who nobly opposed, against the currents of the time, misogyny and all kinds of racism, prejudiced nationalism, slavery and imperialism" (p. 2). These mistreatments of Johnson set the book's priorities; Hudson is interested in Johnson's contributions to the making of ideas about "class, gender, political party, the public, nationhood and empire" (p. 5). On all these subjects the book has much of interest to offer. Yet, as we shall see, readers must treat it with caution.

Hudson's aim is "to reposition Johnson within the specific and transforming historical events of his lifetime, accepting all that might make him morally uncomfortable to us as well as admirable" (p. 2). But not quite all, for Hudson has very strong preferences to vindicate. The central of these is his wish to locate Johnson in "a *process* that was changing England from a pre-modern to a modern society" (p. 3), a process identified with a confidence born of the complete omission of historians' recent doubts about whether such a great transition from premodernity to modernity ever actually occurred.

Other examples of dependency on much older historical scholarship quickly pile up, and three instances particularly stand out. The first occurs in chapter 1, which concerns class. "No less than the bourgeois ideologues who led the French Revolution, Johnson represented a social stratum, the incipient middle class" (p. 6). Indeed, "Johnson's most significant effort was to define the val-

ues and social role of what later became known as the 'middle class' " (p. 12); but the qualification, "what later became known as," is seldom present, and we more often meet "an emergent middle class" (p. 3) and a language of class that "evolved throughout the eighteenth century" (p. 31). Clearly, social relations were changing over that period, but historians must object that the term "class" in Johnson's lifetime was still synonymous with the much older language of "rank," "order," and "degree," not with "class" doctrine as conceptualized in the 1820s and '30s.

The second comes in chapter 3, which concerns political party. Here Johnson is presented as "a particular stream in the watershed of modern English conservatism" (p. 6), his later life showing "a pattern of deepening conservatism" (p. 10), despite the fact that conservatism was a new ideology of the 1830s. This collapsing of early-eighteenth-century Toryism into (that quite different creature) "conservatism" has unfortunate consequences for Hudson's argument, since it allows him to dismiss Jacobitism as a "red herring" (p. 3) and to depict Johnson as the champion of a "new Toryism" in the late-eighteenth century (evidently unaware of Ian R. Christie's demolition of that misleading idea).[1] For Hudson it was a conservatism defined against a growing "radicalism in Johnson's later years" (pp. 5, 128, 134), again despite the fact that radicalism was a new coinage of the 1820s, and a "conservatism" that is presented as Johnson's "response" to "the transformation of English society by capitalism" (pp. 8, 114), although "capitalism" was a later conceptualization still.

The third is in Chapter 5, which concerns "the construction of English nationhood." Once more, we read of "Johnson's nationalism," and learn that "Johnson contributed to the emerging ideology of a *British* nationalism." Nationalism, again, was a new doctrine about group identity that can be shown to have been coined in the early-nineteenth century, and the anachronistic projection of it back into an earlier period hampers an otherwise valuable analysis.

The problem with Hudson's invocation of these contexts is that he evidently believes them to be securely established by historical scholarship, and so produces no evidence of his own to support them; but this is no longer sufficient. Worse still, his own next steps in the argument are often not established by evidence. Take this one: "By relying on standards of etymology and analogy, Johnson facilitated the independence and self-definition of what came to be called 'the middle class' " (p. 41). Really? How? An historian might expect a whole volume, or at least a chapter, to show Johnson's influence in this respect; but we find no such evidence here.

Hudson is on much stronger ground in chapter 2, which concerns Johnson's ideas on gender relations, using Amanda Vickery's work intelligently, and in chapter 6, on "The Material and Ideological Development of the British Empire," which shows Johnson's nuanced and changing position on war and territorial expansion. This essay rescues Johnson from the charge of being an imperialist by correctly arguing, inter alia, that "the very word 'imperialism' was not coined in English until the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 171), an approach that Hudson regrettably does not adopt in other chapters. But other chapters have much to offer, too, even when built on questionable frameworks: chapter 1 carefully traces Johnson's attitudes to birth, wealth, and virtue as premises for social status; and chapter 4 traces Johnson's attitude to the developing idea of the public realm, postponing the reality of a middle class until "very late in the century" (p. 120).

The most problematic section of the book is chapter 3, on Johnson's politics. This has been an explosive issue since the publication of the second edition of Donald J. Greene's *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* in 1990 with its notorious introduction, ranting against all who had taken a different view since the book's first publication in 1960. This controversy polarized scholars, and Hudson finds himself in the camp of those who regarded the idea that Johnson was, in his youth, drawn to the Stuart option as not just wrong, but grossly offensive. Yet Hudson's book has a major shortcoming. Much scholarship has been devoted to this issue since 1990, but the latest contribution to the debate to appear in Hudson's notes is volume 7 of *The Age of Johnson*, published as long ago as 1996. Since 1996, a considerable amount of new work has appeared in print, and the whole subject has been taken much further than then seemed possible. It is remarkable that none of this scholarship features in Hudson's otherwise detailed volume, and doubly unfortunate for him that many of his arguments have already been rendered inadmissible.

Since the debate has moved on, it would not be helpful to go through his text in detail; but three general points can be made. First, Hudson objects that "scholars have not often taken fully into account that his [Johnson's] attitudes were unfolding in conjunction with the changing circumstances and ideologies of his era" (p. 78). But it is precisely a picture of a changing Johnson that has been proposed by the scholarship that Hudson seeks

to dismiss, and that the followers of Donald J. Greene, committed to a model of an unchanging, homogeneous Johnson, found so disturbing. Second, Hudson is driven to accept Johnson as a Tory, but wants to resist further movement by presenting him as a "Hanoverian Tory," loyal to the settlement of 1714. Unfortunately, although there is much evidence for Johnson's Toryism, there is none for his acceptance of the legitimacy of the Hanoverian accession, George I or George II, and none that he conceded even to George III a *de jure* title. Third, Hudson argues that "the great majority of the evidence for his [Johnson's] loyalty of [sic] the Stuarts is negative" (p. 79). Yet contextual argument is exactly Hudson's chosen method in his own book, as it was Greene's. Much positive evidence, too, has indeed been produced. Most important of all is the evidence for Johnson's religion, especially that which points to his having been a Nonjuror; but this whole area is entirely missing from this book. Much more might be said about Hudson's arguments in this chapter, and about his characterization of the scholarship he dismisses; but since it has been said already in work published since 1996 to which Hudson does not refer, this book is not a reliable guide to the current state of the debate. This is unfortunate, since an informed contribution from Hudson would have been welcome; and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that author and publisher alike have been ill served by the publisher's readers.

The common thread in Hudson's analysis is to seek to vindicate Johnson by showing him to be modern, or a key player in the development of modernity. On class, he writes, "I will present Johnson as a far more complex, significant, and even forward-looking figure than historians have generally realised" (p. 12), not a defender of "traditional buffers against modern change" (p. 25); "Johnson was in fact more a man of the 'future' than he is usually credited with being" (p. 27). On politics, Johnson's life "may even be said to mirror the development of a recognizably modern political praxis and philosophy" (p. 77), this being a "claim for Johnson's political modernity" since it identifies him with a new conservatism rather than claiming that he "remained entrenched in the attitudes of a past era or a defunct political ideology" (p. 77). "Johnson was not merely a backward-looking and intransigent conservative who clung vainly to old values, old learning and old politics" (p. 107), clearly for Hudson too reprehensible a stance to merit consideration. Johnson's standing for "principle rather than expediency, conviction rather than interest ... suggests an important degree of modernity in his views" (p. 79), although, apparently in contradiction, "the modernity of Johnson is signaled by his separation of virtue or learning from the sphere of politics" (p. 107). On nationhood, "England exemplifies a nationalism of a very modern kind" (p. 135), and it is this that Johnson is presented as promoting: "Especially towards the middle part of his career ... Johnson increasingly prized the *modernity* of England" (p. 146). Indeed England "might ... be called the first characteristically "modern" nation" (p. 153). In conclusion, "we can hardly do better than Johnson as a personality, as a *text*, for understanding how modern England came about" (p. 221). Hudson evidently thinks this reliance on an idea of "modernity" is unproblematic. So it was, in the history (and the polemic) of Lawrence Stone and his generation; but much has changed in ways that Hudson does not seem to appreciate. Just what was that "modernity" that is central to Hudson's argument? We never quite learn.

Paradoxically, his normative use of an idea of modernity also compromises the declared intention of the book, stated in the introduction and restated in the conclusion: to rescue Johnson from those writers who have "given priority to testing his views ethically against the standards of modern (and largely North American) liberal-democratic values" (p. 225). Yet it is hard to see the normative association of Johnson with "modernity" as anything else, or the normative dismissal of other scholarship (like that of Robert DeMaria and Thomas Kaminski) which has "dwelled instead on his [Johnson's] roots in Continental forms of Renaissance humanism" (p. 225).

Hudson's desire to contextualize Johnson is admirable. The volume contains much scholarship and many helpful insights; but historians may doubt whether the contexts into which Hudson is so confident that Johnson fits are always correctly identified.

Note

[1]. Ian R. Christie, "Was there a 'New Toryism' in the Earlier Part of George III's Reign?," *Journal of British Studies*, 5 (1965-66): pp. 60-76.

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