

for his research: "Pseudo-Intellectualism as a Force in American History."

*Clyde Wilson is thought of in some limited circles as a real historian.*

## The Bishop's Egg

by Christie Davies

The Politics of Sex and  
Other Essays on Conservatism,  
Culture, and Imagination  
by Robert Grant  
New York: St. Martin's Press;  
248 pp., \$55.00



Robert Grant's essays range widely across political philosophy, literature, and aesthetics, from Edmund Burke to Václav Havel, from Jane Austen to the fiction of the 1930's, from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, from Mozart to Rennie Mackintosh. Yet Grant is always knowledgeable, always clear and readable, always interesting. He is able to cover his range of subjects adequately, without ever lapsing into the obscurity of a polymath or the superficial dazzle of a new Renaissance man.

His most interesting essays concern the nature of conservatism. In the foreword to the book, Raymond Tallis writes:

In Grant's understanding of it . . . true conservatism is no more hostile to change than to ideas. Some change is inevitable, some positively necessary; but it must be properly informed, preserve continuity and respect tradition ("embodied practical knowledge"). Grant's conservatism is not a matter of party, nor confined to politics. It grows out of his perception of the interconnectedness of human concerns, and his respect for whatever has evolved peaceably and naturally out of our long-term dealings with each other. Such things, among them culture, elude a narrowly technological, rationalist perspective.

This is an excellent statement of what Grant stands for and why his essays will be a welcome addition to the libraries of

conservative individuals and institutions in the English-speaking countries. Grant writes well about Burke, but it is his two essays on 20th-century conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott that are of most interest. Oakeshott was a respected thinker, yet—as Grant points out—he was never a global guru (unlike, say, the vacuous John Kenneth Galbraith, the deeply flawed and ideological Gunnar Myrdal, or the fellow-travelling Harold Laski), and he deserves to be more widely known. Grant's essays will help to achieve this. Oakeshott's great contribution was to expose the irrationalism of "Rationalism," by which he meant the idea that politics and government can be planned by reference to "abstract intelligence . . . suitably backed by the necessary technical or factual knowledge." It is a "category mistake" whose proponents fail to see that "every activity generates its own kind of rationality (that is the principles articulate or otherwise, appropriate to its successful pursuit) and that it is foolish and futile to apply the techniques and assumptions appropriate to one kind of activity to others for which they were never designed and from which they never emerged."

It is not just socialism that Oakeshott is attacking but any kind of politics or political thought involving this fallacy. (As Grant points out, he was critical of Hayek as a crypto-rationalist and has nothing in common with the Archimedean rationalism of later liberal thinkers such as Rawls and Nozick.) On the latter thinkers, Grant comments shrewdly that "it would not be altogether unjust to describe their efforts as exactly the sort of 'crib' to politics that Oakeshott once accused Marxism of being." Oakeshott was not a communitarian but an individualist, understood as "a virtuous explorer of his moral, cultural and intellectual inheritance."

There is an interesting continuity between the Oakeshott essays and Grant's own treatment of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the House Beautiful. Mackintosh, a Scottish architect and furniture designer, was modern and imperious and still has fanatical admirers in countries as distant from Scotland as Japan. An "aesthetic planner," as Grant calls him, he deliberately designed chairs with backs twice as high as a seated man so that they would be uncomfortable, incompatible with the presence of children, and easily breakable, particularly in the Scottish tea shops that bought them. The fragility of

the furniture emphasized the decorum of the tea rooms, in contrast to the raucous and sometimes violent inebriation of the lower-class Glaswegian bar, where even the most robust of furnishings might regularly be smashed to fragments. But then, speculation about aesthetic fashion is vain. It is difficult, for example, to see why we should accept Grant's thesis that the preceding high-Victorian interiors, whether in Scotland or America, rigorously excluded anything remotely suggestive of death from open display. Surely he is wrong; in an age of early death, the clutter of knickknacks was also a parade of relics of those who had died—the carved walrus tooth brought back by Captain Uncle Harold, long since drowned in the wintry North Atlantic; the vases left to the householder in poor consumptive cousin Mildred's will.

Robert Grant's book is a bishop's egg: Nearly all of it is good, my lord. The Oakeshott and Burke yolks will nourish the mind of the reader, and the aesthetic albumen is bound to please; only the shell is doubtful—the cover has the feel of a Carrington executed by Lytton Strachey's devotee of that name.

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## Hugging Himself

by Jeffrey Meyers

A Life of James Boswell  
by Peter Martin  
New Haven: Yale University Press;  
613 pp., \$35.00



James Boswell (1740-95), whose frank and revealing *London Journal* sold more than a million copies, is the most "modern" and widely read 18th-century author. His circle of friends—Johnson, Burke, Gibbon, Reynolds, Hume, Goldsmith, Garrick, and Fanny Burney—was the most brilliant in the history of English literature. Cursed with a morbid Calvinistic streak, Boswell had uneasy relations with his austere disapproving father, a high-court judge in Scotland, whom he compared to a cold surgical instrument. A pushy and self-promoting,

anxious and ambitious outsider, Boswell nevertheless had a genius for friendship. He successfully courted two notorious intellectual celebrities, Voltaire and Rousseau, whose lives and thought were antithetical to those of his moral hero, Samuel Johnson. Forced by his father into a law career, he lost several clients to the gallows and witnessed their executions. His adventurous trip to the wilds of bandit-ridden Corsica, then ruled by Genoa, led to his passionate support for revolutionary hero Pasquale Paoli. Boswell's *Account of Corsica* established his reputation in Europe and influenced British and French policy toward the island.

Boswell had an intense, volatile relationship with Johnson, who shared his melancholia and was one of the most troubled and fascinating men who ever lived. Boswell's fanatical devotion to his subject (Johnson exclaimed: "You have but two topics, yourself and me, and I'm sick of both"), compulsive searching out of original documents, denigration of competitors and rivals, attention to anecdote and minute detail, his creation of a "Flemish picture" and dramatization of crucial episodes in the life of his subject—all established the technique and form of modern biography.

Boswell suffered throughout his life from religious crises, alcoholism, and manic-depression. He had an uneasy marriage with a wife who died early of consumption. Obsessed by low life and filthy prostitutes, he craved a harem, saying, "I ought to be a Turk," and suffered 20 bouts of gonorrhoea. Like Pepys and Casanova, Boswell was passionately introspective; his journals expose, with brutal honesty, his sexual philandering and illegitimate children. Boswell tells us more about himself, and all his faults, than any writer ever has.

In the 1920's, the dramatic discovery of his papers (now at Yale) in an ancient Irish castle revealed a treasure trove of information. Yet Boswell has been sterilized by his academic biographers. Frederick Pottle's *James Boswell: The Earlier Years* (1966) and Frank Brady's *James Boswell: The Later Years* (1984) are scholarly, leaden, and desperately dull. The path is wide open for a one-volume life intended for the general reader. Peter Martin's life is clearly written and solidly researched. But since the best parts of the story are all too familiar, it lacks a vital spark and isn't nearly as good as the lives of Johnson by John Wain, W.J. Bate, and Lawrence Lipking. Martin quotes, but

doesn't analyze, the letters, concentrates on events themselves rather than on their meaning, and produces many superfluously detailed sentences—such as "Young Coll was leading them to Sir Allan Maclean's cottage on the island of Inchkenneth, just off the coast next to the island of Ulva at the mouth of Loch Na Keal"—which, to most readers, are meaningless. He has nothing original to say about *The Life of Johnson*.

Martin gives repetitive accounts of Boswell's boredom, depression, gambling, alcoholism, sexual escapades, venereal disease, and obsession with public executions, but doesn't explain this psychopathology. The boredom came from the dour life in provincial, Presbyterian Scotland; the depression was a family curse that had turned his brother into a raving maniac. Boswell took refuge in self-destructive gaming and drinking ("I grew monstrously drunk . . . mingled frenzy and stupefaction") and in that state was sometimes beaten, robbed, and thrown into the gutter. He burst into romantic raptures about women of his own class ("how happy should I be if she consented . . . to make me blest!") and devised specious arguments to justify fornication and adultery ("irregular coition was . . . no dreadful crime"). His "whoring rage" was particularly rabid when he toured Italy, pursuing married women despite the danger of instant death if discovered by their husbands. As Geoffrey Scott elegantly put it: "he was pedantic in Holland, princely in Germany, philosophical in Switzerland, and amorous in Italy." In one ardent encounter, his mistress is "undressed by the maid, too modest to do so in front of Boswell, who with candle in hand paces impatiently outside in the dark and cold courtyard." In another assignation, this one with the pregnant wife of a soldier, his telegraphic style foreshadows Leopold Bloom's stream of consciousness in the "NIGHTTOWN" scene of *Ulysses*: "Oho! a safe piece. In my closet . . . To be directly. In a minute—over. I rose cool and astonished, half angry, half laughing. I sent her off."

These guilt-ridden depravities demanded self-punishment in the form of venereal disease. (Despite the manifest danger with prostitutes, Boswell was usually without "armour.") These encounters sometimes led to genital abscesses that made it difficult to walk and took five months to heal. His obsession with executions, sometimes viewed from the top of the hearse that would carry away the

victims, provided a terrifying warning (often accompanied by nightmares) for sinners—like himself—who were surely destined for damnation. Boswell's attraction to condemned criminals was closely connected to his sympathy for the oppressed and for underdogs of all sorts, from his feudal tenants to the American revolutionaries. When his first cousin and future wife hesitated about committing herself to such a mercurial character, Boswell threatened to set sail for America and become "a wild Indian." Though his sexual guilt continued with his wife, he constantly betrayed her (instead of confessing, he left his journals around for her to read); his "voluptuous" demands when she was pregnant and tubercular made her cough up blood.

Boswell's character was a mass of contradictions. Exuberant and spontaneous, unguarded and familiar, he was good natured and high spirited, agreeable and likeable, with a genius for pleasing: "one of those people," a friend observed, "with whom one instantly feels acquainted." Boswell could also be fatuously proud of his ancestral lineage (though his wife reminded him that they were "no better than any other gentleman's family") and absurd in his self-complacent posturing. He dedicated an anonymous ode to himself, thanking "James Boswell Esq . . . for the profound respect with which you have always treated me." He told Rousseau that he fully deserved his friendship, called himself "one of the most engaging men that ever lived," and when especially pleased with himself "just sat and hugged myself in my own mind." But Boswell could also be self-critical. He admitted that his knowledge was restricted, his self-esteem excessive, his avarice extreme. His journals were a brilliant register of his follies and triumphs.

Boswell's friendship with Johnson was the central event of his life. Although he sometimes rebuked his friend (always impatient with human folly) for his severe tongue-lashings, he deliberately drew Johnson's fire in order to create memorable scenes. The two men's arduous journey through the wilds of Scotland (where "no wheel had ever rolled") proved that Johnson's feelings for Boswell were greater than his prejudice against his native land and inspired Boswell's second masterpiece, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. Although they could sit silently together for a "long time in a sort of languid, grave state, like men