DOCTOR THOMAS CAMPBELL
1733–1795

THOMAS CAMPBELL, the man who kept the Diary, requires some description. To most Johnsonians he is at best a shadowy figure—merely a name appearing several times in Boswell’s Life—but at the time of his first visit to London in 1775 the tall, handsome Irishman was no shadow. Conspicuously large and stout, with a ruddy complexion, he was always ready to joke about his size. Mrs Thrale tells that once they all laughed when Campbell, speaking to Dr Johnson about another large man (‘Bruce of Abyssinia I believe’), had insisted ‘indeed now Sir & upon my honour—I am but a Twitter to him’.¹ He had an Irish wit, as well as a northern brogue, an ever-present curiosity, and an engaging manner. As Mrs Thrale put it: ‘He was a fine showy talking man. Johnson liked him of all things in a year or two.’²

Apparently, what impressed people most about Campbell was his agreeable manner. To be sure, Boswell found the visitor almost too affable, and wrote in his

¹ Lansdowne MSS. at Bowood. Mrs Piozzi to Hester Maria Thrale, 23 April 1796. Mrs Piozzi tells the same story in a number of places. See the 1788 edition of Johnson’s Letters (i, 329); and Autobiography of Mrs Piozzi, ed. Hayward, 2nd ed. 1861, i, 99.
² Autobiography, loc. cit.
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Journal on 5 April 1775 of a conversation that day with Mrs Thrale:

I told her that I had asked Dr. Campbell, the Irish Clergyman, to dine today at Dilly’s, as he was so desireous to see Mr. Johnson, was so goodhumoured a man, and so thankful for any civilities. That he was quite like a pet sheep, (Mrs. Thrale gave me the English phrase, a cayed sheep,) went with the cows, walked about the house, and every body, even the children, gave him clover or a handful of corn or a piece of bread out of their pockets. Every body gave something to Campbell —'Poor Campbell'. She thought my idea a very good one.1

Of Thomas Campbell’s early life we know very little. Born on 4 May 1733 at Glack in the county of Tyrone, he was the eldest son of the Rev. Moses Campbell, curate to the Archdeacon of Armagh, and afterwards rector of the parish of Killeshilling.2 His mother, Elizabeth Johnston, of Tully, county Monaghan, seems to have been of a fairly well-to-do and prominent family. One of her brothers, George Johnston, was M.P. for Portarlington, 1727–30, and another, Baptist Johnston, was M.P. for Monaghan Borough, 1747–53, and High Sheriff of that county in 1728.3

Nothing is known of the boy’s early schooling, except that he was prepared for college by a private tutor, and entered Trinity College on 15 April 1752, giving his age

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1 Boswell Papers, x, 187 (Wednesday, 5 April 1775). The usual spelling of the word used by Mrs Thrale is ‘cade’.
2 See Charles Campbell’s letter to Bishop Percy, 28 Feb. 1810. (Nichols’ Literary Illustrations, vii, 796.)
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as sixteen.¹ Campbell was admitted as a Pensioner—that is, an ordinary fee-paying student. Two years later, after an examination, which probably covered ‘most of the Latin and Greek authors of note’, he became a ‘scholar’.²

Having proceeded to the degree of B.A. in 1756 and to that of M.A. in 1761, he was in the latter year ordained to the curacy of Clogher.³ For eleven years after his ordination Campbell performed the duties of a country curate, enlivened by occasional long visits to Dublin and the surrounding country. All this time his two most absorbing interests—research into Irish antiquity, and the study of pulpit oratory—were being formed.

Whether Campbell ever married is uncertain. No definite records are available, and he himself never mentions a wife in any of his letters or his Diary. Furthermore, years later J.B. Nichols wrote: ‘It is believed that he was never married.’⁴ On the other hand, twentieth-century descendants of the Campbell family bear witness to a marriage and actually give the lady’s name—Jane

¹ Burtchaell and Sadleir, Alumni Dublinaenses. If the date of his birth is correct as given by his nephew Charles, Campbell must have been at least eighteen.
² In Trinity College there were seventy scholars, who with the Fellows formed the corporation. A scholar was exempted from college fees, held rooms at half rent, had a small salary per annum and free commons. For a description of student life see also A. P. I. Samuels, Early Life and Correspondence of Edmund Burke (Cambridge, 1923).
³ J. B. Leslie, Clogher Clergy and Parishes, Enniskillen, 1929, p. 62. Campbell was ordained priest 4 Sept. 1763.
⁴ Illustrations, vii, 766. Campbell ‘had a niece living with him in 1791’.
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Holmes of Moyare, Pomeroy Parish. In any event, Mrs Campbell certainly was not alive as late as 1775.

At the death of his father on 26 January 1772, Thomas Campbell, as the eldest son, inherited half the family plate and a lease in Bohard. In the spring of the same year he received from his old college the degrees of LL.B. and LL.D.; and with this recognition came preferment in the church. On 15 August he was collated prebendary of Tighallon, and on 8 February 1773 was made Chancellor of St Macartin’s, Clogher.

By the winter of 1775 Dr Campbell was an important church dignitary, a preacher of high repute, and a rising young Irish antiquary. Armed with a little note-book he set out to see something of London and the world; and on 23 February 1775 went aboard the packet boat for Holyhead.

In the account of his journey and his impressions of places and people Campbell was no dry-as-dust recorder. Seldom curbing his naturally acid pen, he gave full vent to his disgust when conditions annoyed him. But he was just as eager to give praise where it was deserved.

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1 J. B. Leslie, Clogher Clergy, p. 62. Chancellor Leslie tells me that he secured the information about the marriage from the late Dean of Dromore, the Very Rev. Henry Swanzey.

2 J. B. Leslie, Armagh Clergy and Parishes, Dundalk, 1911, p. 331.

3 For the date of the degrees see Alumni Dublinenses, p. 130. The two degrees were often conferred simultaneously, and were given at fixed periods after the B.A. on the payment of certain fees and the performance of formal academic exercises. See Translation of the Charter and Statutes of Trinity College, Dublin, Dublin, 1749, p. 161.

4 H. Cotton, Fastae Ecclesiae Hiberniae, 1849, iii, 96, 104. See also Leslie, Clogher Clergy, pp. 62, 87, 152–3. In Campbell’s time the parishes of Currin and Killeevan formed the rectory of Galloon, which was the corps of the Chancellorship.
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preachers in London, in general, he judged very wooden, and many of the services inferior. An ardent devotee of the theatre, he found many of the London actors unable to approach his own Dublin favourites. On the other hand, there were some for whom he could not withhold the highest praise. Music did not interest him, but painting was one of his hobbies, and he visited all the galleries of prints and pictures. But people interested him most; and since Campbell had some of the recording instincts of James Boswell, it is the accounts of people which make his Diary valuable.

The first few men he met in London, as might have been expected, were Irish. But Campbell was not satisfied with seeing the sights of the Capital and dining with his former friends in college; the men and women he wanted to meet were the figures of importance in the intellectual world. The longest entries in the Diary describe his days with Dr Johnson and his circle.

How Campbell secured an introduction to the Thrales we may never know, though possibly it was through some Irish business acquaintance. At any rate, on 14 March he crossed the river to Southwark, where he was amazed at the immensity of the brewery, and pleased at the learning of his hostess. That day Dr Johnson was not there; two days later, however, when Campbell dined again with the Thrales, he met the Doctor, as well as the Italian scholar, Baretti. His first impression of Johnson was extremely unfavourable, but fortunately this distaste did not keep him from devoting many pages in his Diary to Johnson’s conversation.

Boswell is responsible for the story that one of the chief reasons for Campbell’s journey this year was to
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see the great lexicographer. On 6 April 1775 Boswell recorded:

I mentioned that Dr. Thomas Campbell had come from Ireland to London, principally to see Dr. Johnson. He seemed angry at this observation. Davies. ‘Why, you know, Sir, there came a man from Spain to see Livy; and Corelli came to England to see Purcell, and, when he heard he was dead, went directly back again to Italy.’ Johnson. ‘I should not have wished to be dead to disappoint Campbell, had he been so foolish as you represent him; but I should have wished to have been a hundred miles off.’ This was apparently perverse; and I do believe it was not his real way of thinking: he could not but like a man who came so far to see him. He laughed with some complacency, when I told him Campbell’s odd expression to me concerning him: ‘That having seen such a man, was a thing to talk of a century hence,’—as if he could live so long.¹

One of Campbell’s most winning traits was his desire to please. On 20 April, when at the Thrales’, he heard his hostess tell of her difficulty in getting the son of a poor riding master in the Borough admitted to Christ’s Hospital, the famous Blue Coat School. The chief obstacle, it appeared, was that since the boy had been born in Ireland, the necessary papers about his birth were not available. At once Campbell offered to search out the baptismal record and send back a copy.²

In London Campbell was struck by the general ignorance about Ireland. Few Englishmen knew anything of their neighbouring island, and scarcely any seemed disturbed by this lack of knowledge. Thence sprang the idea that he might write a book describing the

¹ *Life*, ii, 342–3, 519. Also p. 339. Dr Burney insisted that Corelli was never in England.
² *Thraliana*, ed. Balderston, i, 118.
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historical monuments of Ireland, the places of interest to tourists, the characteristics of the inhabitants, as they might appear to a cultivated English traveller. By this means, as Campbell later described his purpose, he might ‘recommend toleration in Ireland, and a more liberal communication of commercial and political privileges in England’. If written in ‘a light, airy manner’, such errors as were sure to creep in might be considered ‘more venial’, and the whole would provide pleasant reading as well as instruction.

With all this in his mind, Campbell returned to his home in May 1775. Two months later he set out for Dublin to gather material for his book. As he planned it, the work was to be a series of letters, written by an anonymous Englishman to his friend, John Watkinson, M.D.—the letters themselves to be filled with sketches of the social life, the local traditions, the historical background of the country through which he travelled. Like Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands Campbell’s book was to be a common-sense account of a part of the British Isles rarely visited by cultured travellers.

Campbell remained in Dublin for about a month, commenting on the buildings, the art, the fashions, the drinking, and pointing out the obvious comparisons with London. Dublin, he insisted, was a more hospitable city, but, of course, visitors were more rare. On the other hand, Dublin’s streets were dirtier and less attractive.

In London, one can rarely want amusement, the very streets are an inexhaustible source of it. There is something refreshing in that variety of cheerful objects, which they perpetually ex-

1 Illustrations, vii, 800.
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hibit. There is such a clearness in the streets, such a richness in the shops, such a bustle of business, such a sleekness of plenty, such a face of content, and withal, such an air of pleasure, as infuse the most delicious sympathies. Here, we see but little to cheer, or exhilarate reflection, but much to sadden and depress the spirits. There is, indeed, a motion, but it is such, as when the pulse of life begins to stagnate, or like that of the wheel of some great machine, just after the power which impelled it, ceases to act.¹

After some short jaunts outside Dublin, Campbell on 21 August set out for Kildare—to begin his longer tour. He thus described what he intended to do:

I purpose giving you sketches of the country through which I travel, that you may have some idea of its present state, whether natural or improved. But lest they should seem overcharged with still life, I shall heighten the prospect with human figures as they present themselves; and to vary the scenery, retrospective views of manners, customs, and arts shall be interspersed.

You are not to expect either order or method in the arrangement of my observations: I shall set them down as they occur, without much attention to time, place, or other accident. All I shall promise is, fidelity in reporting facts....

My object is not only to see the face of the country, and learn its present state, but also to compare this state, with what it has been, and what it might be.

And so he began by calling Kildare ‘but a poor town’, discussing the local antiquities, tossing out compliments for the Irish antiquary, Major Vallancey, and describing his feelings on his recent visit to Shakespeare’s birthplace at Stratford. It was all very casual and offhand. From a disposition on ancient Irish history he shifted

¹ Philosophical Survey, pp. 30–1. The following quotations are all from the London edition of this work.
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without difficulty to the Ossianic controversy of the moment. Fresh from the London battles of Johnson and the Scotch, Campbell was full of the question and spent twelve pages proving, as all good Irishmen had always known, that Macpherson’s versions were forgeries.

For the next two and a half months Campbell wandered in a leisurely manner around southern Ireland, visiting most of the places of interest. At Cashel he astonished the natives by taking measurements of the old ruins, and was astonished himself at the gaiety and high spirits of the gentry, gathered together for a horse-race and an assembly. The ladies he found ‘elegantly dressed, in the ton of a winter or two since in London’, while they seemed to vie with the men in vivacity and ‘display of animal powers’. The lot of the common people, on the other hand, he found ‘beastly’.

It must not be thought that Campbell’s emphasis was solely on local customs. Ingenuously he passed from one idea to the next—from a preposterous story of Bishop Berkeley’s producing a giant, to comments on the Druid religion; from descriptions of the revolutionary ‘white boys’, to a differentiation between various Irish beliefs in witches and fairies; from neo-classical ideas of landscape gardening, to anecdotes of Goldsmith picked up at Athlone from the widow of his former tutor in Trinity College.

After returning to Dublin early in November, Campbell devoted the last fifteen letters to a full discussion of the commercial, literary, artistic, and musical life in Ireland of the day. By this time he had given up the pose of being an objective English observer, and let himself go in an attempt to show the merits of his own
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country. He argued urgently for a commercial union of England and Ireland—always a topic near his heart—and gave many pages to the array of great men produced by Ireland in the past.

Campbell’s special pleading and antiquarian speculations are of little interest to-day, but his general observations are often amusing. Indeed, with a certain amount of judicious pruning the letters might still provide some entertainment, for Campbell’s prose style at its best recalls the colloquial charm of Steele or Goldsmith. But this is to anticipate. Though first drafts of the letters were undoubtedly completed by December 1775, the entire work was not ready to show a publisher until the next October, when Campbell set out on his second trip to London.

Of this second visit, which was prolonged until May 1777, we know very little. No diary was kept, or, at least, none has survived. Boswell was absent from London the entire time, and Mrs Thrale does not mention Campbell in Thraliana. Nevertheless, we know certainly that he sought out Dr Johnson on a number of occasions, for in a later publication Campbell refers to this winter in London when ‘I had been honoured (and it is my pride to acknowledge it) with his familiarity and friendship’. And late in the spring Johnson, in one of his own letters, specifically mentions a conversation with Campbell. Since the manuscript was accepted for publication by W. Strahan and T. Cadell, it is possible that Johnson may

\footnote{Mrs Thrale, during the late autumn and early winter of 1776–7, remained at Streatham, ill and dispirited, expecting the birth of another child.}

\footnote{Illustrations, vii, 762. Taken from Strictures, p. 334.}

\footnote{To Charles O’Connor, 19 May 1777 (Life, iii, 111). See p. 13.}