

Knowledge and Verve

Remembering Paul Johnson



by Theodore Dalrymple

Paul Johnson, prolific journalist and best-selling popular historian, has [died at 94](#). The range of his writing's subject matter was astonishing: from Egyptology and the history of the Jews and Christianity to that of the United States; from studies of Mozart, Napoleon, and Darwin to art history and the history of modern times. He was, as this range might suggest, vastly knowledgeable and possessed of an elephantine memory. He was also a formidable polemicist: indeed, it was as if he were born with polemic in his blood.

He was born in 1928 in Stoke, in the Pottery district of England, which he later charmingly recalled in an uncharacteristically mellow memoir, *A Vanished Landscape*. His father was the principal of an art school there, and Johnson was himself a good amateur watercolorist.

After Catholic boarding school and Oxford, and a spell as a conscript in the army (then obligatory), he joined the *New Statesman*, the left-wing weekly that was at the time the most distinguished such journal in Britain. He eventually rose to be its editor, a position he kept for six years, during which the circulation rose to its highest-ever level of 100,000.

At one time a firm socialist and acolyte of the founder of Britain's National Health Service, Aneurin Bevan, Johnson moved rapidly to the right when he saw the chaos and impoverishment caused by militant unionism. By the time Margaret Thatcher came to power, he was firmly of her persuasion, and in 1981, he began writing a weekly column for the conservative *Spectator*.

His stream of books was almost torrential. Perhaps his biggest and most influential one was [*Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*](#) (1983). A believing Catholic, Johnson saw the horrors of the century largely as a consequence of the decline of religious belief:

The decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse would leave a huge vacuum. The history of modern times is in great part the history of how that vacuum has been filled. Nietzsche rightly perceived that the most likely candidate would be what he called the "Will to Power."

What Johnson called "gangster despots" came to dominate the history of the first half of the twentieth century, and he was scarcely more flattering about the self-proclaimed liberators of the second half. Even those who did not altogether approve of, or share, his historical outlook admitted that this book

was a tour de force. *Modern Times* influenced a generation of American conservatives.

Johnson liked nothing more than to infuriate by means of iconoclastic polemic. His book *Intellectuals* (1988) provided potted biographies of such revered figures as Rousseau, Marx, and Tolstoy, demonstrating what rotters they all were in their personal lives. This was not exactly an exercise in scientific method, but it was good fun and gave pleasure to those who distrust intellectual gurus. It also gave rise to insinuations that Johnson himself did not always quite live up to the moral ideals that he so fiercely propounded in public.

He coined striking phrases—Hitler's views, for example, were "the syphilis of antisemitism in its tertiary phase"—and he could never be accused of mealy-mouthedness. His views, though somewhat changeable, were expressed with vigor approaching dogmatism, though they were always well-informed. You knew where you stood with him.

It is customary to say of remarkable men that we shall not see their like again. Whatever may be the case with other remarkable men, this is likely to be true of Paul Johnson. It is unlikely that anyone will tackle so huge a range of subjects again with such knowledge and verve.