

All in a Don's Day

The chance to review a series of blogs on scholarly life was an offer Tom Palaima couldn't refuse

May 10, 2012

Mary Beard's *All in a Don's Day* brings together selections from the past three years of the blog she has written for the *Times Literary Supplement* website since 2006. I have never looked at Beard's blog. Nor did I read the first collection of blog entries, *It's a Don's Life* (2009). I review her book as a book, *tabula instrumenti computatorii rasa*.

Beard likens a blog to "a version of autobiography, or of a diary". She admits that choosing entries for *All in a Don's Day* made her aware of how much her and our lives have changed during her six years as a blogger. She understandably feels this way after rereading her personal opinions on events through which she lived. To me, however, *All in a Don's Day* brought back memories of reading, 40 years ago, another peculiar form of biography, James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Both books have a single dominant intellectual voice expressing ideas about human affairs, public and personal, important and trivial, serious and funny. The spontaneous thoughts of their central figures well deserve our admiration, even if both Boswell and Beard have lightly polished original words to give them a brighter shine. Beard never "argues for victory", as Johnson did when taking up an opinion he did not really hold, but she is fair-minded in presenting opposing viewpoints.

Like Boswell's biography, this collection has interlocutors, in the form of commenters on Beard's blog, moving on and off the stage. These minor players offer idiosyncratic perspectives. Some are true masters at turning phrases. In my reading, I greeted them as welcome friends whenever they reappeared. *All in a Don's Day* would not go completely flat without the remarks of XJY, Anna, Paul Potts, Anthony Alcock, Oliver Nicholson and other commenters; but they save the book from being a routine academic memoir. They also give it an intellectual edginess and social conscience it would otherwise lack.

Read, for example, the lightning-strike antidote by E. Longley, a self-described "prole who did two Oxford degrees" to the self-congratulatory blog entry about graduation days (29 June 2009): "I hoped it meant something that the daughter of a binman and a cleaner (i.e., herself) was being hectored in Latin in the Sheldonian, but realistically, probably not a lot." I wonder what course her life has taken.

As is natural with a florilegium, reader responses to the excerpts of a given day will vary according to what kind of day they are having. I read the first two blog entries on "How rich are Cambridge students?" (29 January 2009) and on a Cambridge police sergeant named Paul,

dubbed by Beard an "e-cop", who had started a police blog (25 February 2009), while I was hosting a scholar who had interviewed Japanese Second World War veterans responsible for unspeakable atrocities. We discussed with my students the human capacity to do evil. Right then, Beard's entry on the Cambridge e-cop struck me as privileged condescension. When Beard admitted that the student-run survey of their parents' wealth was so flawed as to be worthless, I wondered momentarily why I had taken on reviewing this book. Reading on, I reached Beard's intellectual joke (April 2009) about a baby who died of heat stroke on a hot day after being accidentally left sleeping strapped into a car seat by an overworked, distracted, white-collar father - it happened right in my city, Austin, Texas. I called it quits for the evening.

I doubt, however, whether readers who do not have a review deadline will pick up *All in a Don's Day* at inappropriate moments. Attentive readers will come away better informed about negative trends in higher education (13 January 2010, 6 April 2010) and why they are happening (3 August 2009). They will grasp how complex are issues such as plagiarism (14 February 2010), the repatriation of cultural objects (11 December 2009) and the percentages of black students admitted to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (7 December 2010). They will learn about life from Mary Beard and about Derrida from Anthony Alcock and Paul Potts (31 December 2011). And they will laugh as heartily as I did at old Roman jokes (15 March 2009) and an old chestnut about Henry Kissinger offered up by XJY (24 September 2009).

All in a Don's Day

By Mary Beard

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