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Samuel Johnson (3): Founding of *The Spectator*

Lead: In 1711, English British essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele founded a periodical known as the *The Spectator*. It exposed the growing British middle class to the ideas of the Enlightenment and gave authors a chance to try out a new style: the periodic essay.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Sam Johnson said of Joseph Addison, one of the founders of *The Spectator*: “Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but

not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison.”

In 1700 there were an estimated 3,000 coffeehouses in London. People gathered there for conversation and intellectual entertainment, and organized clubs and societies there. One of the main attractions and grist for conversation at the coffeehouses were pamphlets and daily or regularly printed periodicals which contained news, opinion, and in the case of *The Spectator* – commentary on life. It was the stated aim of *The Spectator* to promote civility and standards of polite society through moralistic but witty commentary generally avoiding political

controversy. In fact, purpose of the editors was to “enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality.”

Addison estimated that twenty people read each of the 3,000 circulated issues, meaning that each edition reached 60,000 Londoners, ten percent of the population. *The Spectator* appeared six days a week in 1711 and 1712 and then re-appeared briefly in 1714. The layout was that of a fictional narrator, “Mr. Spectator,” who reports to his readers the observations of his close friends, who included luminaries such as Alexander Pope – essays - from various positions and experiences of society but mostly from the middle class. The issues of *The Spectator* were

reproduced in an eight volume set, distributed and read widely, and were quite influential during this entire era.

Johnson used the format of *The Spectator* when he published his own periodicals, *The Rambler* and *The Idler* later in the century. Across the Atlantic, Benjamin Franklin, also a fan of *The Spectator*, studied the essays reproduced there to improve his own prose writing skills and ever reprinted some of them.

Research assistance for this periodic series of essays looking at the 18th Century through the eyes of Samuel Johnson by Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is

Dan Roberts.

Resources

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