

ON HUMAN FAILINGS

A MEDITATION ON JOHNSON'S LIFE OF LONDON BY BORIS JOHNSON

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I have been reading Boris Johnson's *Life of London* – an easy and entertaining read on history, including the rise of the business class, English as the international language and the on-going struggle between court and class, law and power.

As the book passes from the Roman and Viking age into the centuries following 1000 AD and the Norman Conquest I was struck by ordinariness – no more, the *deficiencies* of men and women we study and admire. Chaucer, for example, is said to be fat, depressed, having paid a fine for the “raptus” of a young woman and receiving a stipend from a nobleman who was apparently dallying with his wife. And, not knowing the history of pornography I can't say that Chaucer was the first modern pornographer but there is no question his writing are bawdy and written in a form of English we can read and understand. Thus, then, as now, pornography led the way to advance the language of the day and English evolved from the language of the masses to that of the mercantile class, eventually the courts (from French) and the world.

Richard Whittington, the first great banker, is said to have come from the streets, his parents being dead, shined shoes for a penny, with which he bought a cat, then put on ship and sold to an Eastern royal for a minor fortune, allowing him to loan money to the government and king, not for interest but for tax breaks and concessions – a story adopted in kind by Donald Trump who, like Whittington, in fact had well off parents and a model of success followed by corporate America and Wall Street to this day.

Holbrooke, a scientific and all-around genius, who, although he apparently, had a disfigured face, diseased skin and an odd mannerisms was greatly respected in his day but ruined his own reputation by claiming all and prior rights to all great ideas of the time and place. Although his claims may have been true at least in part, he made the mistake of claiming to be the first author of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* even though there is no evidence he had ever put same to writing. As a result of offending Newton and other luminaries those who controlled history essentially wrote Holbrooke out of history. Yet, any fair and balanced valuation of his work shows Holbrooke to be a “star in the celestial firmament,” if we may borrow a phrase and that his physical and personal shortcomings did not seem to matter – at least until attempted to create a false resume for history.

Samuel Johnson - *the* Samuel Johnson – conservative in principles, but ardent worker for the underdog – is said to have quivering, slobbering lips. So, it seems that when we look at these fellows of history physical and personality shortcomings seemed

to have had little to do with their success in life. I find this striking in comparison to the looks-glamour celebrity culture of today.