



The Notorious Sir John Hill: The Man Destroyed by Ambition in the Era of Celebrity

George Rousseau

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Sir John Hill (1714–1775) was one of Georgian England’s most vilified men despite having contributed prolifically to its medicine, science and literature. Born into a humble Northamptonshire family, the son of an impecunious God-faring Anglican minister, he started out as an apothecary, went on to collect natural objects for the great Whig lords and became a botanist of distinction. But his scandalous behavior prevented his election to the Royal Society and entry to all other professions for which he was qualified. Today, we can understand his actions as the result of a personality disorder; then he was understood entirely in moral terms. When he saw the dye cast he turned to journalism and publication, and strove maniacally to succeed without patronage. As a writer he was also cut down in ferocious ‘paper wars’. Yet by the time he died, he had been knighted by the Swedish monarch and become a household name among scientists and writers throughout Britain and Europe. His life was a series of paradoxes without coherence, perhaps because he was above all a provocateur.

In time he would also become a filter for the century in which he lived: its personalities—great and small—as well as the broad canvas of its culture, and for this reason any biography necessarily stretches beyond the man himself to those whose profiles he also illuminates.

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