

Samuel Johnson

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Samuel Johnson



Samuel Johnson circa 1772,
painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Born: September 18 [O.S. September 7] 1709
Lichfield, England

Died: December 13, 1784
London, England

Occupation: poet, biographer,
essayist, lexicographer

Samuel Johnson LL.D. (September 18 [O.S. September 7] 1709^[1] – 13 December 1784), often referred to simply as **Dr Johnson**, is one of England's best known literary figures^[2]: a poet, essayist, biographer, lexicographer and a critic of English literature. He was also a great wit and prose stylist, well known for his *aphorisms*.^[3] Dr Johnson is the most quoted of English writers after Shakespeare^[4] and has been described as one of the outstanding figures of 18th-century England.^[5]

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Early life and education

The son of a poor bookseller, Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire. He attended Lichfield Grammar School. On 31 October 1728, a few weeks after he turned nineteen, he entered Pembroke College, Oxford, as a fellow-commoner. After thirteen months, however, poverty forced him to leave Oxford without taking a degree and he returned to Lichfield. Just before the publication of his Dictionary, Oxford University awarded Johnson the degree of



Johnson's birthplace in Market Square, Lichfield

Master of Arts. In 1775, Oxford University awarded him an honorary doctorate.

He attempted to work as a teacher and schoolmaster, initially being turned down by the headmaster of Adams' Grammar School, Rev Samuel Lea, but then finding work at a school in Stourbridge. Aged twenty-five, he married Elizabeth "Tetty" Porter, a widow twenty-one years his elder. His first work published in 1735 was a translation from the French of Lobo's Voyage to Abyssinia.

In 1736, Johnson established a private academy at Edial, near



Dr Johnson's House, 17 Gough Square, London



Lichfield. He had only three pupils, but one of them was David Garrick, who remained his friend, while becoming the most famous actor of his day. He began the writing of his first major work there, the historical tragedy *Irene*, which was later produced by Garrick in 1749.



Johnson had rooms as an undergraduate on the second floor above the entrance of Pembroke College, Oxford

In 1737, penniless Johnson left for London with his former pupil David Garrick. There he found employment with Edward Cave, writing for *The Gentleman's Magazine*. For the next three decades, Johnson wrote biographies, poetry, essays,

anniversary of
the publication of
Johnson's
*Dictionary of the
English
Language*
commemorated

pamphlets and parliamentary reports. These were presented as if they had been recorded verbatim, but were actually

on a British 50
pence coin

second-hand reports based on interviews with witnesses. He also prepared a catalogue for the sale of the Harleian Library. He continued to live in poverty for much of this time. The poem *London* (1738) and the *Life of Savage* (1745; a biography of Johnson's friend and fellow writer Richard Savage, who had shared in Johnson's poverty and died in 1744) are important works from this period.

Establishing career

Between 1745 and 1755, Johnson wrote perhaps his best-known work, *A Dictionary of the English Language*. The rise in literacy and the declining cost of printing demanded clearer standards in spelling, meaning and grammar. It was on the morning of June 18, 1746 that Johnson, over breakfast at the Golden Anchor tavern in London, signed a contract with the booksellers/publishers William Strahn and associates to produce an authoritative dictionary of the English language. The contract stated that Johnson was to be paid 1500 Guineas (£1,575) ^[6] in instalments based on

delivery of manuscript pages; all expenses relating to the project, *ie* ink, paper, assistants, *etc* to be at Johnson's cost and responsibility. It was assumed by Johnson himself that the project would take approximately three years. It would take, in fact, nearly ten years.

Despite common assumptions, Johnson's was not the first dictionary of the English language. In the preceding 150 years there had been upward of nearly twenty "English" dictionaries. The first, published in 1538, was a small Latin-English dictionary by Sir Thomas Elyot. Robert Cawdrey's "*Table Alphabeticall*", published in 1604, was the first monolingual English dictionary. [7] Johnson's dictionary was to rise above all these because of his meticulous research; his depth and breadth of definitions and his careful use of description, *eg*:-

PHILOLOGY

Criticism; grammatical learning

"Temper all discourse of *philology* with interspersions of morality."

-- William Walker,
*English Examples of
the Latine Syntaxis* (1683)

The published dictionary was a huge book: with pages nearly 1½ feet tall and 20 inches wide, it contained 42,773 words; it also sold for the huge price of £4/10s.. It would be years before "Johnson's Dictionary", as it came to be known, would ever turn a profit; authors' royalties being unknown at that time, Johnson, once his contract to deliver the book was fulfilled, received no further monies connected to the book. Johnson, once again a freelance writer, albeit now a famous one, faced a grim hand-to-mouth existence; however, in July 1762 the twenty-four year old King George III granted Johnson an annual pension of £300.^[8] While not making Johnson rich, it allowed him a modest yet comfortable independence for the remaining thirty years of his life.

During the decade he worked on "the Dictionary", Johnson, needing to augment his precarious income, also wrote a series of semi-weekly essays under the title *The Rambler*. These essays, often on moral and religious topics, tended to be more grave than the title of the series would suggest. They ran until 1752. Initially they were not popular, but once collected as a volume they found a large audience. Johnson's wife died shortly after the final issue appeared. During his work on the dictionary,

Johnson made many appeals for financial help in the form of subscriptions: patrons would get a copy of the first edition as soon as it was printed in compensation for their support during its compilation. Among the patrons to whom he appealed in vain was Lord Chesterfield. After the dictionary was finally published, Chesterfield sent Johnson a large cheque. Johnson returned it with his now famous Letter to Chesterfield, in which he compares himself to a drowning man who calls for help vainly, then slowly swims to shore and crawls up on the beach, only to be offered a belated assistance. He later altered a line in "The Vanity of Human Wishes":

These ills the Scholars life entail,
Toil, Envy, Want, The Garrett and the Jail

by replacing the word "Garrett" with "Patron".

Johnson began another series, *The Idler*, in 1758. These were shorter and lighter than *The Rambler* and ran weekly for two years. Unlike his independent publication of *The Rambler*, *The Idler* was published in a weekly news journal.

In 1759, Johnson published his philosophical novella *Rasselas*, written in one week to pay for

his mother's funeral and settle her debts. Some years later, however, Johnson gained a notoriety for dilatory writing; contemporary poet Charles Churchill teased Johnson for the delay in producing his long-promised edition of Shakespeare: "He for subscribers baits his hook / and takes your cash, but where's the book?"^[9]

Status achieved

In 1762, Johnson was awarded a government pension of three hundred pounds a year,^[10] largely through the efforts of Thomas Sheridan and the Earl of Bute. Johnson met James Boswell, his future biographer, the following year. Around the same time, Johnson



A portrait of Johnson from 1775 by Joshua Reynolds showing Johnson's intense

formed "The Club", a social group that included his

concentration and the weakness of his eyes

friends Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, David Garrick and Oliver Goldsmith. By now, Johnson was a celebrated figure. He received an honorary doctorate from Trinity College, Dublin in 1765, followed by one from Oxford ten years later.

It is widely believed, through many out of context humorous quotations and asides, that Johnson despised the Scots; however, careful reading of Boswell and of Johnson shows that, while Johnson cited ignorance and laziness as a primary cause for the degraded conditions under which most Scots lived, he frequently tempered his censure with a measure of empathy. He undertook a lengthy tour of Scotland with his great friend, himself a Lowland Scot, James Boswell. While Johnson's record of these travels tended toward social commentary and amateur ethnography, Boswell's account is primarily a study of Johnson, whom he would more thoroughly cover after the latter's death. The first conversation between Johnson and Boswell is frequently quoted:

Boswell: Mr Johnson, I do indeed come

from Scotland, but I cannot help it.

Johnson: That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help.

In 1765, Johnson met Henry Thrale, a wealthy brewer and Member of Parliament, and Thrale's wife, Hester. They quickly became friends and soon Johnson became a member of the family. He stayed with the Thrales for fifteen years until Henry's death in 1781, sometimes staying in rooms at Thrale's Anchor Brewery in Southwark. Hester Thrale's reminiscences of Johnson, together with her diaries and correspondence, are second only to Boswell as a source of biographical information on Johnson.

Boswell, Johnson and the "Journey"

In 1773, eleven years after Johnson had met Boswell, the two of them set out on *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, the title Johnson used for his account of their travels published in 1775. (Boswell's account, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, was published in 1786, as a preliminary to his *Life of Johnson*.) Their visit to the Scottish Highlands and the Hebrides took place

while the post-Jacobite pacification was crushing the Scottish clan system, at a moment when the romanticisation of Gaelic culture was accelerating. Johnson proceeded to attack the claims that James Macpherson's Ossian poems were translations of ancient Scottish literature, on the grounds that "in those times nothing had been written in the Earse language."^[11] He was vindicated, for Macpherson could not produce his postulated manuscripts. However, Johnson also aided Scottish Gaelic culture by calling for a Bible translation, which was produced soon afterward. Until then, Scottish Gaels had only Bedell's Irish translation.

Final works

In the 1770s, Johnson, who had tended to be an opponent of the government early in life, published a series of pamphlets in favour of various government policies. In 1770 he produced *The False Alarm*, a political pamphlet attacking John Wilkes. In 1771, his *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands* appeared, cautioning against war with Spain.^[12] In 1774 he printed *The Patriot*, a critique of what he viewed as false patriotism. The last of these pamphlets, *Taxation No Tyranny*,^[13] 1775, made

the case against American colonists, then clamouring loudly for independence.

Johnson's final major work was the *Lives of the English Poets*, a project commissioned by a consortium of London booksellers. The *Lives*, which were critical as well as biographical studies, appeared as prefaces to selections of each poet's work. Johnson died in 1784 and was buried at Westminster Abbey.

Character sketch

Large and powerfully built, Johnson had poor eyesight, was hard of hearing and had a scarred face as a result of childhood scrofula. He also had a number of tics and other involuntary movements; the symptoms described by Boswell suggest that Johnson had Tourette syndrome^[14] and obsessive-compulsive disorder^[5].^[15] In the medical terms of his own period, he tended towards melancholia.

Johnson was a devout, conservative Anglican, a staunch Tory and a compassionate man, supporting a number of poor friends under his own roof. He was an opponent of slavery and once proposed a toast to the "next rebellion of the negroes in the

West Indies".^[16] He had a black manservant, Francis Barber (Frank), whom Johnson made his heir.^[17] He admitted to sympathies for the Jacobite cause but by the reign of George III he had come to accept the Hanoverian Succession. He remained a fiercely independent and original thinker, which may explain his deep affinity for John Milton's work despite Milton's intensely radical — and, for Johnson, intolerable — political and religious outlook.

Among students of philosophy, Dr Johnson is perhaps best known for his "refutation" of Bishop Berkeley's idealism. During a conversation with his biographer, Johnson became infuriated at the suggestion that Berkeley's idealism could not be refuted. In his anger, Johnson powerfully kicked a nearby stone and proclaimed of Berkeley's theory, "I refute it *thus!*".^[18]

Johnson used a curious form of shorthand when writing poetry: he would compose a line in his head, then only write down the first half. It appears that he would remember the second half by the rhyme. Then, when he had more time, he would go back through the manuscript and complete each line. Scholars have often noted that the ink colour is consistent between all the beginning half-lines

and between all the ending halflines, but that it frequently differs between the first half of a line and the second half. This method is reminiscent of the feats of memory that enabled a Celtic bard to remember over a hundred long tales or Homer to recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Legacy

Johnson's fame in the wider world is due in large part to the enormous success of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Boswell, however, met Johnson after Johnson had already



Johnson (right) and Prince George portrayed in the Blackadder episode Ink and Incapability

achieved a degree of fame and stability, leading Boswell's biography to emphasize the latter part of Johnson's life. Consequently, Johnson has been seen more as a gruff but lovable society figure than as the struggling and poverty-stricken writer he

was for much of his life.

Before arriving in London, Johnson stayed in Birmingham, where he is remembered in a frieze within the Old Square. Birmingham Central Library holds a Johnson collection, containing around two thousand volumes of his works (including many first editions) and literary periodicals and books about him.

In popular culture, Johnson (played by Robbie Coltrane) was featured in the third series of *Blackadder* (in the episode titled 'Ink and Incapability'), presenting his dictionary to Prince George for his patronage, whereupon it is thrown on the fire by the servant Baldrick. Johnson was also played by Coltrane in the film *Boswell and Johnson's Tour of the Western Islands*.

Major works

Essays, pamphlets, periodicals

1747	<i>Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language</i>
1750-1752	<i>The Rambler</i>
1758-	

- 1760 *The Idler (1758-1760)*
1765 *Preface [to The Plays of William Shakespeare]*
1770 *The False Alarm*
1771 *Thoughts on the Late Transactions
Respecting Falkland's Islands*
1774 *The Patriot*
1775 *Taxation No Tyranny*

Poetry

- 1738 *London*
1747 *Prologue at the Opening of the Theatre
in Drury Lane*
1749 *The Vanity of Human Wishes*
 Irene, a Tragedy

The Dictionary

- 1755 Dictionary of the English Language.

Novellas

- 1759 The History of Rasselas, Prince of
 Abissinia

See also

- Dr Johnson's House
- Samuel Johnson Prize
- Touch Pieces

- Hodge, Dr Johnson's cat

Notes

1. ^ After the British changed from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, Johnson celebrated his birthday on 18 September.
2. ^ "Dr. Johnson", Websters Dictionar, retrieved 14 July 2007.[1]
3. ^ "Samuel Johnson", Encyclopedia Britannica 15th Edition, retrieved 14 June 2007.[2]
4. ^ "Samuel Johnson", Encyclopedia Britannica 15th Edition, retrieved 05 June 2007.[3]
5. ^ "Samuel Johnson", Britannica Concise, retrieved 14 June 2007.[4]
6. ^ Hitchings, Henry, *Defining the World*, (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, NY 2005)
7. ^ Hitchings, Henry, *Defining the World*, (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, NY 2005)
8. ^ Ibid.
9. ^ Charles Churchill (1731-1764) biography jamesbowell.info Retrieved 1 December 2006.
10. ^ That is about GBP 41,000 in the prices of 2005, according to Inflation: the value of the pound 1750-2005 - PDF. House of Commons Library research paper 06/09, 13 February 2006. Retrieved 1 December 2006.
11. ^ Johnson's *"Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland"* and Boswell's *"Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides"* ed. Chapman, 104-5.
12. ^ *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands* Retrieved 9 December 2006.

13. ^ Taxation No Tyranny. Retrieved December 5, 2006.
14. ^ Tourette Syndrome Association. Samuel Johnson Accessed 10 February 2005.
15. ^ Sharma, Vijai P. Obsessive Thinking, Compulsive Behaviors. Mind Publications (1996). Accessed January 30, 2007.
16. ^ Boswell, James *The Life of Johnson*, 23rd September 1777: "Upon one occasion, when in company with some very grave men at Oxford, his toast was, 'Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies.'"
17. ^ Boswell, James *The Life of Johnson*, Aetat.75 transcribes Johnson's will.
18. ^ James Boswell, "Life of Johnson"

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- Avenged Sevenfold, *Bat Country* ("He Who Makes A beast Out of Himself, Gets Rid of The Pain Of Being A Man").

External links

- Samuel Johnson at the Open Directory Project
- The Works of Samuel Johnson. Organized links to collections of Johnson texts online.
- Works about/by Samuel Johnson at Internet Archive. Scanned books.
- Works by Samuel Johnson at Project Gutenberg
- Essays by Samuel Johnson at Quotidiana.org
- *Life Of Johnson* by James Boswell, abridged by Charles Grosvenor Osgood in 1917

"omitt[ing] most of Boswell's criticisms, comments and notes, all of Johnson's opinions in legal cases, most of the letters,..." (Project Gutenberg)

- *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* by Hester Thrale
- A list of e-texts of Johnson's works from the University of Pennsylvania Online Books Page.
- An online data base of the contents of Dr Johnson's dictionary, 1st and 4th editions.
- Johnson Society of London. A society based in London with regular meetings about Johnson.

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