

**Entry for Samuel Johnson from
*THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY***

(reproduced with the permission of Oxford University Press)

Author: Pat Rogers

Johnson, Samuel (1709–1784), author and lexicographer, was born in Breadmarket Street, Lichfield, on 7 September 1709 (after the change of calendar in 1752 he celebrated his birthday on 18 September), the first child of Michael Johnson (1657–1731) and his wife, Sarah Ford (1669–1759); later the couple had another son, Nathaniel (1712–1737), of whom little is known apart from the fact that he went into the family trade of bookselling and did not enjoy good relations with his elder brother. Samuel's birth took place in the Johnsons' home, a new four-storey house on the corner of Breadmarket Street and the Market Square; it survives today as the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum. Overlooking the property stands St Mary's Church, where Samuel may have been baptized on 17 September 1709, although he appeared so frail at first that a baptismal ceremony was carried out in his home within hours of his birth. Attending his birth was George Hector, 'a man-midwife of great reputation' (*Yale Edition*, 1.3), whose nephew Edmund Hector (1708–1794), a Birmingham surgeon, became a close lifelong friend. As godfathers the parents chose Richard Wakefield, the town clerk, and Samuel Swynfen (c.1679–1736), a prominent local physician. The child was named after his maternal uncle Samuel Ford.

Michael Johnson's bookshop occupied the ground floor. Originally apprenticed to a member of the London trade in 1673 and made a freeman of the Stationers' Company in 1685, he had set up business in Lichfield in 1691. He published a few books and operated in other local towns on market days. In later years he also practised as a tanner and parchment manufacturer, though with little success. Michael Johnson held a number of civic offices in the borough, including those of senior bailiff and magistrate: Samuel was born during his term as sheriff. Michael was a high-churchman and possibly, as Boswell believed, a Jacobite, although outwardly at least he conformed to the Hanoverian dispensation. Plagued by 'a vile melancholy' that he may have passed on to his son (Boswell, *Life*, 1.35), he possessed some learning and ambition. At the same time he was evidently subjected to Sarah's consciousness of her own superior social origins. Awkward in company, strictly pious, and uninterested in books, she

can hardly have found an ideal companion in Michael; later in life her son respected her memory, but gave little sign that he enjoyed a warm or loving relationship with his mother.

Almost immediately the parents placed Samuel in the care of a wet-nurse named Marklew, who lived in George Lane nearby. By the time he returned home a few weeks later, he was already suffering from maladies, which affected him all his days. 'A poor, diseased infant, almost blind' (*Yale Edition*, 1.5), he had an infection in his left eye and a severe case of scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes), possibly contracted from the nurse's milk. An operation was later carried out on the glands in his neck, which left visible scars. At some stage he also underwent a bout of smallpox which caused further disfigurement. When he was two, in March 1712, he was taken by his mother to London, in order to be 'touched' for the scrofula by Queen Anne. Johnson was almost totally deaf in his left ear, and this may well have been apparent from infancy. The convulsions that marked his behaviour in adult life may have derived from congenital factors or from these infant diseases; one theory is that his condition can be diagnosed as Tourette's syndrome, where the symptoms often grow more apparent in adolescence. The only result of his contact with the queen seems to have been the gift of a gold 'touchpiece', which he wore round his neck as an amulet until his death.

Schooldays

Samuel was taught to read by his mother, perhaps assisted by a maid named Catherine. He then gained the rudiments of learning at a dame-school kept by a widow, Ann Oliver, whose kindness he recalled with pleasure. Precocious from infancy, he was made to perform in public by his fond father. At the age of six or seven he studied for some time with Thomas Browne, a former shoemaker turned schoolmaster, and then in January 1717 he became a day boy at the ancient grammar school of Lichfield, to embark on Latin under the usher Humphry Hawkins. Two years later he entered the upper school, where he was placed at first under the Revd Edward Holbrooke, a less experienced and effective teacher, and then under the headmaster, John Hunter, whom the boy found 'very severe, and wrong-headedly severe' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.44). Despite Hunter's cruel discipline, Johnson came to respect his ability to drum Latin into his charges, and attributed much of his humane learning to the thorough

grounding he received from the headmaster. In addition, the solitary and physically challenged boy spent much of his time leafing through the stacks of the family bookshop, and there he could explore works which would never have been on any official syllabus. Later he displayed predictable knowledge of classical literature, but also curious learning in less obvious fields, including humanistic lore.

While at school, Johnson made the acquaintance of boys who were to be among his friends, including John Taylor, subsequently a clergyman in Ashbourne, and Robert James, who became a physician celebrated on account of his fever powder. The youth's closest ally remained Edmund Hector, who lived near by in Sadler Street. Opposite the cathedral close lived the family of Captain Peter Garrick, who was on good social terms with Michael Johnson: when the captain's son David entered the school, Samuel had moved on, but the two young men (seven years apart in age) certainly knew one another from this period. In 1725 Johnson went to spend nine months near Stourbridge with his sophisticated and, some thought, dissolute cousin, the Revd Cornelius Ford (1694–1731). When the youth returned to Lichfield in June 1726, he was refused permission by Hunter to return to the school, and instead Ford arranged for him to enter King Edward VI School at Stourbridge as a boarder. It is possible that he taught the younger boys in exchange for his own advanced tuition. Meanwhile he pursued the study of literature, with a special emphasis in his exercises on translations from Horace and Virgil: he also wrote a number of English poems and consorted with Ford's circle, including a relative by marriage, Gregory Hickman, who was a leading citizen in the town.

When Johnson left Stourbridge late in 1726, apparently after suffering an illness, his regular schooling came to an end. This was the prelude to a spell of two years back in Lichfield, which he himself considered to be a period of idleness, even though he read widely in a desultory fashion. His father possibly thought that Samuel was serving an apprenticeship in the bookshop. Perhaps it was at this stage, in a fit of late adolescent moodiness, that he refused on one famous occasion to help his father on a bookstall at Uttoxeter market—a show of disobedience which shamed him so much in later life that he stood on the spot for a considerable time, bareheaded as the rain fell, to expiate his fault. This aimless existence might have continued indefinitely, but for some outside impulse. Michael's financial affairs had declined to a point at which it was

impossible for him to support a university education for his son, while Samuel himself lacked the energy to take any useful initiative. A kind offer on the part of an old schoolfellow, Andrew Corbet, made the difference, although this turned out to be no more than a gesture. Corbet had proceeded to Pembroke College, Oxford, and suggested that he should pay some of Johnson's fees to allow his friend to enter the college and provide companionship for the rich young country gentleman. Though the offer was taken up, Corbet never acted upon this promise, and Johnson's days at Oxford were clouded by uncertainty over money. A small legacy which his mother received from her cousin about this time may have helped to pay his fees.

Oxford and Unemployment

Samuel travelled to Oxford with his father and was admitted to Pembroke College on 31 October 1728, shortly after his nineteenth birthday. His residence lasted little more than a year, and outwardly bore the marks of failure: his poverty, social immaturity, and youthful contempt for authority were compounded by renewed fears of idleness. Allegedly he was often to be found lounging around the college gate. His career was abruptly cut short, and he held no degree until the university conferred an MA on him in 1755 in recognition of the forthcoming *Dictionary*. Yet Johnson preserved for the rest of his life a deep affection for Oxford and an abiding loyalty to his college, which he termed 'a nest of singing birds' on account of the number of poets it had nurtured. Ever afterwards 'he took a pleasure in boasting of the many eminent men who had been educated at Pembroke' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.75). Equally, he 'delighted in his own partiality' for the university at large (Piozzi, *Anecdotes*, 26). In his mature years he made regular visits to Oxford: his most durable friendship from Pembroke days was with William Adams, a junior fellow who served as Johnson's nominal tutor after the rebellious young man had sparred for some time with the ineffective William Jorden. In 1775 Adams became master of the college, where he often acted as host when his former pupil visited Oxford. When Johnson was an undergraduate he resumed friendship with earlier acquaintances, relishing in particular the company of his schoolmate John Taylor, who had arrived soon after him. At this time Taylor planned to follow his father and take up a legal career—something Johnson would have loved to do. It was only a short step across the road to Taylor's college,

Christ Church, and the two men shared academic interests as well as social relaxations. Johnson even borrowed notes on the lectures of an admired tutor at Christ Church. When Taylor entered the church, his intellectual concerns fell by the wayside, but at this period he provided stimulating company to his friend, who evidently left an unfavourable impression on others. Many members of the university saw no more than an impoverished Jude with a provincial accent and uncouth manners.

According to the later account by Adams, Johnson achieved some popularity with those who knew him, and even passed for a 'gay and frolicsome fellow', but when this description was reported to him he responded, 'It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.73–4). Intending to fight his way to success by his literary accomplishments and his wit, he deliberately flouted authority. Moreover, his schemes for study were more grandiose than anything he actually achieved. Some of his work helped to promote his reputation in the academic community, notably a translation of Pope's already Latinate *Messiah* into Latin verse, prepared as a college exercise at Christmas 1729. This became Johnson's first published piece when it appeared in a miscellany two years later, and it allegedly impressed Pope himself. On other occasions Johnson failed to deliver required work on time, and no other substantial pieces of writing survive from this period. He probably stayed up for much of the long vacation, as was then quite usual, but pressures were mounting. His father's business was floundering more than ever, his own debts were accumulating, and he had to battle with depressive illness. A renewed burst of religious faith, derived from reading William Law, alleviated but did not dispel these problems. The exact sequence of events is not known, but when Johnson left Oxford for good just before Christmas in 1729, he was already a full term behind with his college fees and had sunk into profound dejection.

This melancholia, which probably started in the previous summer, lasted about three years. Well-placed and sympathetic observers such as Edmund Hector considered that the illness amounted to a full-scale breakdown, and wondered whether Johnson might be subject to a constitutional disease which would impair his faculties for life. The patient tried such remedies as the hapless physicians of this age prescribed, and regularly walked the 30 miles between Lichfield and Birmingham in futile attempts to dissipate his feelings of anxiety. A major symptom was what

Johnson called indolence, which might be construed in modern terms as resembling clinical depression rather than laziness. For his godfather, Samuel Swynfen, now practising in Birmingham, he compiled a state of his case in Latin: this does not survive, but it went the rounds in Johnson's own day when Swynfen, impressed by the cogency with which it was written, passed it on to his acquaintances. Understandably Johnson was outraged by this circulation of private disclosures, and he was never fully reconciled to Swynfen. Meanwhile Michael Johnson had just managed to cling on to his failing business, thanks to a timely loan. But in December 1731 the bookseller died of a fever, only three months after his cousin Cornelius Ford had suddenly expired in a Covent Garden bagnio. Unemployed and suffering from nervous prostration, Samuel now had to face the loss of the two most important male mentors of his youth. It was perhaps the low point of his entire life.

Johnson had already made his first efforts to gain a regular job. A post as usher at his old school in Stourbridge had come up that summer, and Johnson went across to the town about September. Despite the support of his kinsman Gregory Hickman, which should have proved influential, he failed to obtain the appointment; this was the first of several such disappointments in the years to come. While Sarah Johnson attempted to keep the family business going, her son expanded his sorties in quest of a teaching position. Briefly he seemed to have turned the corner when he succeeded in landing a job at Market Bosworth grammar school, some 20 miles east of Lichfield. However, he had to live with the patron of the school, Sir Wolstan Dixie, a boorish embodiment of the caricature squire, and even to act as domestic chaplain. It must have been still worse than idleness, because Johnson lasted only a few months in the post, from March to July 1732. He walked back to Lichfield, with little beyond the paltry inheritance of £19, which was all he could expect from his father's estate during the lifetime of his mother. Soon afterwards, on hearing of the death of an usher at Ashbourne School, he made efforts to gain this post and wrote to Taylor, who was now an attorney in the town. He explained to his friend that his departure from Market Bosworth had been like escaping from a prison. However, when the governors of the school met on 1 August they chose another candidate.

Late in the year Johnson was invited to stay with Edmund Hector, who had become a surgeon in Birmingham, and he remained there for

more than a year. Two notable events took place during his stay: he embarked on his first sustained literary work—a translation of the account of Father Jerome Lobo, a Portuguese Jesuit, of his journey to Abyssinia—and he met his future wife. The book was based on a French translation of Lobo's account, which Johnson had read at Oxford. It was early 1735 before the work appeared, not surprisingly since Johnson's indolence had slowed its progress—so badly, indeed, that it became Hector's role to take down copy which the translator dictated as he lay in bed, and then to carry the manuscript to the printer. *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, which runs to 400 pages, earned Johnson 5 guineas from Thomas Warren, a Birmingham bookseller, although the actual publishers were members of the London trade. Again it was through Hector that a significant meeting occurred: Warren owned the house in which Johnson came to live with his friend. During 1733 Johnson stayed for a time with Warren and began to write for a newspaper which the bookseller had recently set up, entitled the *Birmingham Journal*. Here some of his first published writing, now lost, made its appearance.

Marriage

An even more important contact was established when the young man changed his lodgings about June 1733. His new landlord was a certain Jervis, one of whose relatives was a woman named Elizabeth Porter, *née* Jervis (1689–1752): it was not long before Johnson made the acquaintance of Elizabeth and her husband Harry Porter. The couple's three children included a daughter, Lucy, then aged eighteen. Initially the omens looked bad since Porter, a struggling textile dealer, was the brother-in-law of Johnson's feared schoolmaster, John Hunter. However, matters took an unexpected turn in September 1734 when Harry died and Johnson began to court the widow, who was twenty years his senior. Within a few months he brought his pursuit of the lady to a successful conclusion, and the couple were married on 9 July 1735. They rode the 30 miles to Derby, perhaps stopping at Lichfield, as Johnson had once more taken up residence in his home town. The ceremony took place at St Werburgh's Church, perhaps for the simple reason that it was safely removed from Birmingham, where the widow's family had opposed her wedding: they probably thought that the young man was attracted by his bride's fortune, which amounted to something like £600 (Reade, 6.34–5). There are no grounds for believing this, as Johnson himself acknowledged that it was a love match on both

sides (Boswell, *Life*, 1.96). Unkind observers drew attention to the groom's strange appearance and deportment, while portraying the bride, known as Tetty, in the guise of a blousy and ageing woman who struck absurd postures in an effort to seem youthful. The oddly assorted couple had little by way of a regular income, and family and friends on both sides showed an understandable lack of enthusiasm for the marriage.

The truth was that Johnson had still failed to advance himself in any career. He tried to interest the proprietor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Edward Cave, in occasional contributions to the popular new journal, which Cave had founded in 1731; however, nothing came of this for the time being. Instead he turned once again to the teaching profession, and just before his marriage he served for two months as private tutor to the family of Thomas Whitby, who lived at Great Haywood, near Stafford; there were five children in all, though Johnson's primary responsibility lay with a son of nineteen preparing to enter university. Soon afterwards he learned that the mastership of Solihull School had become vacant. Again an application failed: despite his unquestioned scholarship, the governors were put off by his reputation as 'a very haughty, ill-natured gent.', as well as by the way he had of 'distorting his face' (Reade, 6.29–30). The fresh rebuff must have wounded Johnson, especially as this time he had the backing of an old acquaintance, Gilbert Walmesley, a lawyer and official in the ecclesiastical court of Lichfield. Johnson had been familiar since boyhood with his mentor, who lived a comfortable bachelor existence in the bishop's palace adjoining the cathedral. Walmesley stands out as the most supportive member of the Lichfield community who had watched the precocious Samuel grow up in the town, and Johnson afterwards paid a warm tribute to his humanity, learning, and tolerance: 'I honoured him, and he endured me' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.81).

By the time Johnson got the news of this latest reverse, he had already formulated an alternative plan. His scheme was to set up a school, no doubt funded by his wife's small fortune. Optimistically he wrote to a friend, 'I am now going to furnish a house in the country, and keep a private boarding-school for young gentlemen whom I shall endeavour to instruct in a manner somewhat more rational than those commonly practised' (*Letters*, 1.10). The premises were duly acquired in the shape of a large brick house for rent at Edial, a village 3 miles west of Lichfield, and the would-be proprietor inserted an advertisement in the *Gentleman's*

Magazine. But the enrolment of pupils was tiny, perhaps as low as three or four boys, all recruited by Gilbert Walmesley, and little more than a year after its opening in late 1735 the school had to close. The episode is remembered chiefly because one of the few students happened to be David Garrick, then aged eighteen and a favourite of Walmesley on account of his wit and vivacity. Neither the master nor the pupil was well attuned to the process of turning Garrick into a classical scholar, and a visit to Lichfield by strolling players may have stimulated the young man more than any instruction he received from Johnson.

Life went on in this cramped fashion until the school closed in January 1737. We know nothing of the state of Johnson's marriage, apart from what may be gleaned from cruel performances Garrick later improvised to mimic the connubial dealings of Samuel and Elizabeth. Even Hester Piozzi, who reported these 'comical scenes', was not sure whether they were accurate (Piozzi, *Anecdotes*, 97). But the surviving diary entries are somewhat gloomy, suggesting that Johnson was still morbidly conscious of wasting his time on footling pursuits and still devising a harsh regimen to put himself on to a more productive track. In addition, he applied for yet another scholastic post, on this occasion at Brewood on the other side of Cannock Chase, but he met with no more success than before, as the master had heard something of the applicant's peculiar deportment and thought it might cause ridicule among the pupils. The money which Elizabeth had brought to the marriage had probably all gone. So Johnson had reached twenty-eight with very little concrete achievement. At this low point he took the decision to seek his fortune in London as a writer: his sense of the need for a fresh start may have been strengthened when his brother Nathaniel, who had been living at Frome in Somerset, died without apparent warning at the start of March 1737. But by that time the die was cast, and Johnson was already making his way to the capital.

Going to London

When Johnson left Lichfield on 2 March 1737, he had a companion—but this was not Elizabeth, who remained at home until he could find work. It was Garrick, who was due to enter a school at Rochester. The pair shared a single horse, each riding ahead in turn and tying the horse ready for his companion to arrive on foot: they were certainly impoverished, even if Johnson exaggerated in later years when he claimed that he arrived with

2½d. in his pocket, while his young friend had only three halfpence. These straitened circumstances forced him to take humble lodgings with a staymaker named Richard Norris just off the Strand, where he lived very abstemiously. He spent much of his time working on a tragedy entitled *Irene*, which he had begun at Edial. For a period he took lodgings in Church Street, Greenwich, and attempted to compose his play in the nearby park, but the task remained unfinished. Late in the summer he returned to his home town and managed to get *Irene* completed. After three months he took Elizabeth back with him to London, and he remained ever after a resident of the capital. His mother meanwhile carried on the family bookshop with the help of Samuel's stepdaughter Lucy Porter.

The overtures made to Edward Cave finally paid off in 1738, when the bookseller accepted some verse and then printed a short life of Father Paolo Sarpi in his journal. From this time forward Johnson was Cave's right-hand man in running the *Gentleman's Magazine* from its office at St John's Gate, Clerkenwell. He contributed in almost every issue to regular features of the work, including foreign and domestic news, book reviews, and illicit parliamentary reports. In this last department Johnson brought special renown to the *Magazine*: his stylized accounts of proceedings in the senate of Lilliput, which allegedly came from the pen of Lemuel Gulliver's grandson, gave the substance of the debates, even though verbatim reporting was specifically banned as a breach of privilege by a Commons resolution in April 1738. The series ran from the following June until 1745: Johnson is likely to have had a hand in the reports throughout, and he was solely responsible for their composition between 1741 and 1744. These years saw some tumultuous passages in the final phase of Robert Walpole's long political ascendancy, most notably the contentious events leading to the start of the War of Jenkins's Ear in 1739. Johnson and his collaborators evolved a complex code to record the debates, mixing allegorical byplay in the manner of Swift with studied Ciceronian oratory: speeches were put into the mouths of characters whose names transparently revealed their real identity (as 'Walelop' or 'Ptit'). For all these devices, the *Magazine's* transactions of the senate in Lilliput achieved a plausible enough effect to be cited by later historians as though they were the speakers' *ipsissima verba*. Meanwhile Cave provided his protégé with further opportunities, notably a planned translation of Sarpi's history of the Council of Trent (1619): Johnson was paid almost £50 for the work in progress, but it had to

be abandoned in 1739 owing to a rival version. The same year saw him complete a translation from the French of a commentary on Pope's *Essay on Man*, written by the Swiss theologian Jean-Pierre Crousaz. Johnson is said to have worked with frenzied energy on the task, producing up to six sheets (almost fifty pages) in a single day. His version, published in 1741, provides comments on the text by way of annotation, correcting errors in Crousaz and setting out his own view of the *Essay*.

During the late 1730s Johnson's career was at last beginning to flourish, although he was unable to get *Irene* staged. His first original work of importance, *London: a Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal*, was issued by the leading publisher Robert Dodsley about 13 May 1738: he received 10 guineas as payment. It is a satire of 263 lines, composed in heroic couplets intended to match the vigorous Latin hexameter. The poem is closely based on its model, substituting London for Rome and France for Greece; quotations from the original are placed at the foot of the appropriate page to emphasize some of the choice effects achieved. Johnson captures some of Juvenal's bleak humour, along with his talent for terse epigrammatic phrasing and power of invective. The discontented Umbricius, fleeing the horrors of Rome, is recast as Thales, seeking repose in Wales from a London which offers little beyond urban blight, pollution, crime, and disorder: 'And now a rabble rages, now a fire'. Thales has been dubiously identified with Richard Savage, the troubled bohemian poet, whom Johnson may or may not have met at the time when the poem was written. But the work certainly contains a good deal of autobiographical reference, as in the oblique self-pity of the couplet

This mournful truth is everywhere confessed,
Slow rises worth, by poverty depressed.

Although *London* came out anonymously, the identity of the author was soon discovered. The greatest living English poet, Alexander Pope, whose versions of Horace had recently pushed the 'imitation' of classical models to a new level of sophistication and daring, quickly recognized the merits of the poem and sought out the name of its creator. 'He will soon be *déterré*', Pope accurately predicted to a friend (Boswell, *Life*, 1.129).

Further success came with the appearance in the spring of 1739 of two political satires. The first, *Marmor Norfolciense*, draws on Swift's methods again to attack Walpole's policies through the supposed discovery of an ancient inscription in Latin. The second, *A Complete Vindication of the*

Licensers of the Stage, ironically praises the government's repressive measures against the theatre, as embodied in the *Licensing Act* of 1737. In addition, Johnson continued to take an active share in the monthly offerings of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. However, although he gradually became more visible in the literary world, his private life remained, and remains, shrouded in mystery. He and his wife first took lodgings near Hanover Square, and then moved to Castle Street, on the edge of the fashionable new Harley estate in the West End. By this time Johnson seems to have become friendly with Savage, and according to some reasonably dependable anecdote the two writers took to walking the streets of the city by night 'reforming the world', as Johnson himself put it, in default of the money to pay for a drink in the taverns (Hill, 1.371). Savage was of course hardly the best role model for a young man bent on achieving worldly success, and it would be understandable if Elizabeth felt neglected. At some stage the couple appear to have separated for a period, and Elizabeth sought refuge with a friend. In July 1739 matters came to a head when Savage, racked by debts and unable to concentrate on writing, decided to leave London and rusticate in Wales; the two men never saw one another again.

As these problems beset him, Johnson came up with an answer: to resume his former quest for a post in a provincial school. In August he set off for the midlands without Elizabeth, in the hopes of becoming headmaster of Appleby grammar school in Leicestershire, 10 miles from Lichfield. He was given a letter of reference by Pope to a prominent Staffordshire peer, Lord Gower (later first earl of Gower), who in turn wrote to Dublin to see whether Trinity College might award Johnson an MA degree with the intercession of Swift. The dean was almost past such endeavours, and in any case the degree (had it been granted) would not have met the qualifications for Appleby grammar school, which required its master to be a graduate of an English university. Once more Johnson's bid failed, and in his place a certain Mr Mould was appointed. After his rebuff Johnson went on to Lichfield and then to the home at Ashbourne of John Taylor, who had now entered the church. While in the midlands he fell under the spell of some local women of exceptional charm and humanity. One of these was Mary Meynell, who 'had the best understanding he ever met with any human being' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.83); she subsequently married the politician William Fitzherbert, whom Johnson held in warm regard.

Another was her pious kinswoman Hill Boothby (1708–1756); and a third was Mary Aston (1706–c.1765), member of a large Lichfield family. Two of Mary Aston's sisters were married respectively to Gilbert Walmesley and Henry Hervey, another close friend of Johnson by this date. All three women exercised a powerful effect on the unattached traveller, and it is generally thought that Miss Boothby was the strongest candidate when he contemplated remarriage after the death of Elizabeth, only for the chosen bride herself to fall sick and die within a short time. The visits spread over into 1740, with Johnson attempting to assure his wife in a letter that his 'rambles' had served only to confirm his 'esteem and affection' for her (*Letters*, 1.24). Elizabeth felt some jealousy over Mary Aston, although her husband assured her she had no cause (Piozzi, *Anecdotes*, 103). In April, Johnson returned to London, and he did not see Lichfield again for more than twenty years.

The couple resumed life together in the Strand, but their monetary problems caused them to move regularly over the next few years, finding lodgings generally in the area of Fleet Street. Some of Johnson's work in the *Gentleman's Magazine* now achieved a separate life in the form of pamphlets, including a life of Admiral Robert Blake (1740). Short biographies constituted his most prolific genre at this period, with subjects ranging from Francis Drake to the physicians Hermann Boerhaave and Thomas Sydenham. In the next year Johnson took over as prime author of the reports of parliamentary debates, and he wrote more of his brief lives. A larger undertaking was to compile the catalogue of the huge Harley collection of books and tracts, which the bookseller Thomas Osborne had bought when the second earl of Oxford died in 1741. The task, enlivened by a memorable passage of arms when Johnson knocked Osborne down with a hefty folio, resulted in a work of five volumes (1743–5) describing the collection in detail, as well as an eight-volume sampler of its contents known as *The Harleian Miscellany* (1744–6), on which Johnson collaborated with the noted antiquarian William Oldys. He also made a number of contributions to a large *Medicinal Dictionary* (1743–5) by his schoolfriend Robert James. Little is known of other activity until the death of Savage, which took place in Bristol gaol on 1 August 1743 and prompted Johnson to compose his famous life of the renegade poet. The author received 15 guineas from Cave for the book, which was published anonymously on 11 February 1744. Ever since, *The Account of the Life of*

Mr Richard Savage has remained one of Johnson's most admired works, as a pioneering exercise in psychological biography, as a graphic sociological study of Grub Street, and as a testament of friendship. Johnson gives a vivid account of Savage's struggle to establish his parenthood, and a fair-minded narrative of the poet's trial for murder. Moreover, he manages to steer a course between excessive praise and blame, and reveals much about his own situation through his profound identification with the financial and personal crises Savage had undergone.

Soon afterwards Johnson began to contemplate the first literary project of any scale which he had devised independently. This was an edition of Shakespeare, one of a whole series of undertakings since Nicholas Rowe's innovative venture in 1709. The most recent production was that of Sir Thomas Hanmer, and Johnson's trial publication, a pamphlet entitled *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, incorporated some parting shots at Hanmer's performance when it appeared in April 1745. This appeal for subscribers to the edition might possibly have succeeded, but the project received a body blow when the publisher Jacob Tonson the younger intervened with Cave. The firm of Tonson had long claimed a perpetual copyright in the text of Shakespeare, and under threat of legal action Cave backed down. Johnson again found himself baulked: he was doing less work for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and it appears that about this time he seriously considered entering the legal profession, even though his lack of a degree made this impossible. Underemployed as he may have been, there is no basis for the story that he joined Charles Edward Stuart (the Young Pretender) in Scotland during the failed rising of 1745–6.

The Dictionary

At this juncture there arrived the most significant career opportunity of Johnson's entire life. A group of booksellers headed by Robert Dodsley perceived the need for a new English dictionary to replace the semi-standard *Dictionarium Britannicum* of Nathan Bailey (1730). They found a receptive ear in Johnson, who had pondered for many years on the absence of an English equivalent to the great continental glossaries sponsored by public bodies and academies. What was envisaged was something quite different, a commercial venture financed by a consortium of leading figures in the trade, and one which would be compiled essentially by a single hand—that of a poverty-stricken journalist and pamphleteer, who had

dropped out of university and who had never left England. Johnson prepared a short prospectus for the undertaking, and then signed a contract on 18 June 1746. The compiler was to be paid 1500 guineas, out of which he had to defray the cost of his copyists, and delivery was due in three years. It seems miraculous today that the job took as few as nine years to complete.

For this task, the Johnsons took a substantial house in Gough Square, which survives today off the north side of Fleet Street as a Johnson museum. The garret was fitted out as workroom for the staff, which amounted to five or six assistants, most of them Scots. Johnson used an interleaved copy of Bailey's dictionary in its 1736 edition; he also consulted a wide range of technical and specialist manuals to expand the range of vocabulary. He sought out illustrative quotations in a huge collection of books, from which his amanuenses transcribed marked extracts. Before the mammoth work was completed, a number of distractions held up its progress. Johnson quarrelled with his intended patron, the earl of Chesterfield, to whom he had dedicated a recast version of the prospectus as *The Plan of the English Dictionary* (1747); one outcome was a famous letter of dignified rebuke to the peer. 'Is not a patron, my lord' asked Johnson sardonically, 'one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help?' (Boswell, *Life*, 1.262). It is possible, too, that Johnson revised his editorial methods and made a fresh start about 1750. Ultimately the work appeared in two folio volumes on 15 April 1755, garnished with preliminary matter including a preface of extraordinary dignity and eloquence.

The *Dictionary* left an immense mark on its age. It soon became recognized as a work of classical standing, and in spite of some minor blemishes it has never lost its historical importance as the first great endeavour of its kind. Notable above all for definitions of pith and occasional wit, the dictionary was even more original in the way in which every word, as Johnson put it, had its history. Each entry is organized under the headword to exemplify graduated senses of a term, a procedure which redirected the course of English lexicography. Further, the quotations used to exemplify the usage of a given word combined to form an anthology of moral sayings and helped to define the canon of literature: they show Johnson's taste and piety, for he would not admit extracts from irreligious writers such as Hobbes, Bolingbroke, and Hume. Notoriously, a handful of entries display some of the author's prejudices, as when he

glossed 'whig' as 'the name of a faction', or when he defined a 'patron' as 'commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery'. Some of the preliminary matter reaches a less distinguished level: the grammar and history of the language, for example, come over as perfunctory compared with the main entries. In addition, Johnson's etymologies betray the limit of what was possible in an age when this branch of linguistic study owed as much to inspired guesswork as to scientific enquiry. But for the most part the *Dictionary* was able to demonstrate the fecundity of the language more comprehensively than any of its predecessors. Conscious that his primary role was to record the state of English vocabulary, rather than to legislate for its usage, Johnson registered the entire sweep of words from the crude and demotic to the most rarefied scientific terms and to recent fanciful forms imported from other languages.

The work soon came to be regarded as a standard authority, almost like the statute book. There were several new printings in Johnson's lifetime, but only the 'fourth' edition of 1773 involved an extensive programme of revision, which he carried out in 1771 and 1772. After Johnson died, the cheaper quarto version continued to appear at regular intervals, while a spate of editors offered variously to augment, abstract, and otherwise improve the original work; from 1818 the main such recension was that of the Revd Henry John Todd. Meanwhile the first American edition appeared at Philadelphia in 1819. By this time the *Dictionary* stood for everything that was correct, proper, and of good report; no wonder that Becky Sharp flung a copy out of her carriage, at the start of *Vanity Fair*, in a gesture of youthful rebellion. To more staid spirits such as Noah Webster or Sir James Murray, the book proved a source of inspiration for lexicographic triumphs to come. For all the labour involved, Johnson himself would have liked to do more in this field; as a result, he was disappointed in 1774 when he did not get the chance to revise the *Cyclopaedia* (1728) of Ephraim Chambers, one of the models for his own undertaking, since he admitted to having a fondness for 'that muddling work' of compiling reference books.

During the years spent on the *Dictionary*, Johnson made his name in other branches of writing. First came a curious fantasy entitled *The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit of Teneriffe*, contributed to an educational manual by Dodsley called *The Preceptor* (1748); Johnson also supplied the preface.

The next year, his long-delayed tragedy *Irene* finally achieved a production. It was presented at Drury Lane by David Garrick, by then a star of the London stage as actor and producer—indeed, Johnson had written a special prologue to mark the start of Garrick’s managerial reign at the playhouse on 15 September 1747. The first night of *Irene* on 6 February 1749 had its share of minor disasters, a scene rendered with appropriate dramatic energy in Boswell’s account, and the play lasted for only nine performances in all, but it was not a total flop. Johnson managed to survey its fate with sang-froid, comporting himself ‘like the Monument’ (Boswell, *Life*, 1.199). In fact he received almost £200 from the takings, as well as £100 from Robert Dodsley when the work was published. It is perhaps the only considerable work by Johnson which has not been rehabilitated in modern times: for this we can blame the strenuous neo-classicism of its form and style, together with its remote setting in medieval Turkey. Just one month earlier, on 9 January, appeared Johnson’s greatest poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, a reworking of Juvenal’s tenth satire. The work comprises a bitter reflection on the disappointments of mortal existence, especially those incident to writers and artists:

There mark what ill the scholar’s life assail,
Toil, envy, want, the garret, and the gaol.

A particular strength of the poem lies in its compressed portraits of Wolsey and Charles XII, used within the running argument ‘to point a moral [and] adorn a tale’. Dodsley paid the author 15 guineas for the copyright. Again Johnson showed a mastery of the satiric couplet which few beyond Chaucer, Dryden, and Pope in the history of English verse have equalled.

A year later, on 20 March 1750, Johnson instituted his series of 208 essays entitled *The Rambler*, which came out twice a week until 14 March 1752; he received 2 guineas for each issue. It is perhaps the most characteristic work Johnson ever wrote, addressing as it does a wide range of social, religious, political, and literary themes in a stately style. An important series of essays dealt with Milton; others addressed humanitarian issues such as prostitution and capital punishment. Johnson’s moral outlook lends his papers a depth seldom attained even by his avowed model, *The Spectator* of Addison and Steele, while his criticism includes some of the first serious discussion of the emerging novel. Aptly, among the coadjutors who supplied a few of the essays for *The Rambler*

was Johnson's friend Samuel Richardson, the author of *Clarissa*; others were the learned ladies Elizabeth Carter, Catherine Talbot, and Hester Chapone. By this date Johnson had become something of a champion of women writers, and he gave particular support to the novelist Charlotte Lennox, although it is unlikely that he contributed more than a few lines (if that) to *The Female Quixote* (1752). A sequel to *The Rambler* came out as *The Adventurer* (1752–4), on which Johnson assisted the editor John Hawkesworth by contributing at least thirty papers, mostly grave in tone and philosophical in scope. A thoughtful example is the essay of 16 October 1753, defending the role of visionary 'projectors' in extending human control of the world: 'Many that presume to laugh at projectors would consider a flight through the air in a winged chariot, and the movement of a mighty engine by the steam of water, as equally the dreams of mechanic lunacy' (*Yale Edition*, 2.434).

Bereavements

Three days after Johnson's last issue of *The Rambler*, a moving discourse on the concept of finality, Elizabeth Johnson died at the age of sixty-three. She was buried at Bromley in Kent on 26 March 1752. Johnson, greatly distressed, did not attend the funeral, and while he wrote a sermon for the occasion Dr Taylor refused to deliver it, and it remained unpublished until 1788. The sermon takes as its text the opening words of the Anglican burial service, from *St John's gospel*, and admits candidly that 'to show that grief is vain, is to afford very little comfort' (*Yale Edition*, 14.267). Johnson praises his wife for her devotion, patience, and kindness—and this testimony ought to count for more than the second-hand account of scenes where Garrick mimicked a bibulous Tetty. For the remainder of his days Johnson composed special prayers in memory of his 'dear' wife, and on the last occasion, two years before his death, he wrote in his diary of the 'repentance' both partners had undergone for their faults and misdeeds (*ibid.*, 1.319).

When the *Dictionary* came out Johnson was approaching forty-six. Now finally established as a writer, with a secure base in Gough Square, he had a growing circle of male and female friends. For a time he continued to think about remarriage, but potential brides either died or were found unworthy to succeed Elizabeth. Over the years Johnson's domestic life gradually took on an eccentric air as he admitted to his home a strange cast

of derelicts and waifs. These included the blind poet Anna Williams, noted for her fractious ways; the black servant Frank Barber, who had arrived from Jamaica as a boy; the shabby Robert Levet, an unlicensed surgeon who had made a disastrous marriage; an obscure woman named Poll Carmichael, who may have been a former prostitute; and a widow called Elizabeth Desmoulins, who was the daughter of Johnson's godfather Samuel Swynfen and a conceivable candidate to be Johnson's intended second wife. It was a dysfunctional household, as Johnson told Hester Thrale: 'Williams hates everybody. Levet hates Desmoulins and does not love Williams. Desmoulins hates them both. Poll loves none of them' (*Letters*, 3.140). By the late 1770s, after the move to Bolt Court, there were at times seven awkward house-mates in residence, plus a servant. Johnson looked after this peculiar bunch of people with long-suffering kindness, and he helped Anna Williams to bring out a volume of her *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1766). Those who tried to shift for themselves by leaving their protective environment soon got into trouble: Mrs Desmoulins was summoned for debt, while Frank Barber had to be rescued when he ran away to sea. Barber also made an unhappy marriage and after Johnson's death apparently frittered away the sizeable bequest made by his old master.

For all the disturbance produced by these living conditions, Johnson's career continued to blossom. He remained poor, and once in March 1756 Samuel Richardson came to his aid when he was arrested for a debt of about £5. Other signs were more hopeful: he had now been awarded the degree of master of arts by Oxford University, in time for the letters 'A.M.' to appear as an imprimatur on the title-page of the *Dictionary*. He had established a solid base in the university, and regularly visited Trinity College to call on the scholar and poet Thomas Warton, who became professor of poetry in 1757. A year before this Johnson was appointed editor of a new journal called the *Literary Magazine*. Among the most notable of his many contributions was a review published in the summer of 1757, devoted to a complacent book on metaphysics by Soame Jenyns. Johnson rips apart the Panglossian sentiments of his unfortunate adversary and substitutes his own hard-headed appraisal of life as it is actually lived by the majority of humankind. Some of Johnson's most incisive shorter pieces appeared in other journalistic outlets at this stage. The *Literary Magazine* carried forceful, if brief, essays on the opening phase of the

Seven Years' War, including the martyrdom of Admiral Byng and the unsuccessful raid on Rochefort in September 1757. Johnson reviewed a wide selection of books, including a manual of beekeeping, a catalogue of Scottish bishops, a work by Stephen Hales on distilling sea water, and an onslaught on tea drinking by Joseph Hanway, which provoked a strong defence of the habit by Johnson, a confirmed addict. Hanway, he claimed, had exaggerated the harmful effects of 'this watery luxury', which he himself had not yet felt despite 'soliciting them . . . year after year' (*Yale Edition*, 11.252–3).

Johnson's concerns were as varied as ever at this date. One month he would be writing a short life of Frederick the Great; soon afterwards he would be attacking the management of the Foundling Hospital, London's prime charitable institution. Presciently he fixed on a work dealing with the struggles for the Ohio valley as a harbinger of imperial conflicts to come. But amid these miscellaneous writings he had a much larger undertaking now under way, although it was making slow progress: this was a renewed effort to carry out the edition of Shakespeare projected a decade earlier. Subscription proposals were issued in June 1756, with the firm of Tonson now on board as part of the promoting group of booksellers. Delivery was originally promised for 1757, but the years went by and the work remained incomplete until 1765.

This dereliction aside, Johnson had not been inactive. Between April 1758 and April 1760 he provided over 100 essays to a weekly journal called the *Universal Chronicle*. These papers, written in the guise of 'the Idler', were in a more relaxed style than those of *The Rambler*, dilating often on the follies incumbent on the literary life. The series gained great popularity and was reprinted in other organs up and down the country. Johnson made £84 from the collected edition, published in 1761. Among the best-known essays are nos. 60 and 61, satirizing the irresistible rise of a superficial man of the literary world called Dick Minim. 'Criticism', the first paper drily opens, 'is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense' (*Yale Edition*, 2.184). About the same time, on 20 April 1759, a very different work came before the world: this was *Rasselas*, otherwise known as *The Prince of Abyssinia*, an adaptation of the French *conte* grafted on to the Oriental tale. The central characters embark on an educative grand tour of an imaginary Africa, proceeding into Egypt, and encounter as they go a succession of mortifying episodes which show the

delusive nature of most quests for human happiness. The book cost 5 shillings for two small volumes; Johnson is said to have written the work in the evenings of a single week. He was paid £100 for the first edition, money used to defray costs of the funeral service for Samuel's mother. Sarah Johnson had died about 20 January 1759 at the age of almost ninety and had been buried in Lichfield on 23 January. Once more there was an absentee, as her son did not put in an appearance, although Samuel knew of her final illness and had written to her three times in her final week on earth. 'I am very much grieved at my mother's death', he told his stepdaughter Lucy Porter soon afterwards, 'and do not love to think nor to write about it' (*Letters*, 1.183). It was not until the winter of 1761–2 that Johnson, somehow liberated by bereavement, returned to his home town after a long unbroken sojourn in London.

Pensioner and Clubman

The accession of George III in 1760 meant that for the first time in his adult lifetime Johnson could look on the monarchy with some approval, and hope for a loosening of the grip that the whig ascendancy had maintained for almost half a century. He began to appear in the eyes of many a figure of authority, 'Dictionary Johnson', even though financial pressures made him move to smaller lodgings, first in Gray's Inn and then in Inner Temple Lane. In July 1762 relief came when he was awarded a pension of £300 a year by the first lord of the Treasury, the earl of Bute, perhaps less for services rendered than as an encouragement to support the new administration. Opponents were quick to leap on this as an act of corrupt compliance with the unpopular Bute regime, and for many years Johnson had to endure savage attacks on his integrity as a writer.

Johnson's rise to greater prominence brought with it a widening array of social contacts. At a philanthropic meeting on 1 May 1760 he had his only recorded meeting with Benjamin Franklin. Johnson had been a member of the Society of Arts since 1756, and took a hand in promoting its major exhibition of paintings in 1760. Among his colleagues was Joshua Reynolds, whom he first met c.1756 and with whom he took a holiday jaunt to Devon during the late summer of 1762. The nucleus of the familiar Johnson circle was already in place: by now his acquaintances included Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Thomas Percy, Topham Beauclerk, Bennett Langton, and Charles Burney. In May 1763 there burst into this constellation a startling

newcomer named James Boswell, who achieved a long-standing desire at the age of twenty-two when he chanced to encounter Johnson in a bookshop off Covent Garden. Something in the ambitious young man lifted the spirits of the great man, who allowed him access almost daily until Boswell left for the continent on 6 August; the two drove to Harwich, where they 'embraced and parted with tenderness' on the quayside (Boswell, *Life*, 1.472). Most of the group surrounding Johnson served as founder members of the famous Literary Club, although Boswell and Percy were forced to wait a few years for admission, as was (most pointedly) Johnson's old ally Garrick.

A different world opened up in 1765 when Johnson made the acquaintance of the rich Thrale family. The husband Henry was a businessman and MP, while his wife Hester was a well-born woman with literary interests and considerable social gifts. She soon became Johnson's most confidential friend. In addition to their home at the family brewery in Southwark, the Thrales had inherited a country estate at Streatham, 10 miles south of central London. Johnson first visited the couple in 1766, and within a few years he was allocated his own quarters at Streatham Park, where he spent prolonged periods. A chemical laboratory was even set up there in 1771 for his use, until Henry Thrale decided that the would-be scientist might have an accident owing to his short sight and go up in smoke. A library wing was added to the house, and here in 1780 Thrale hung up thirteen portraits by Reynolds, with pictures of his own wife and daughter joined by the principal members of Johnson's circle. Some of the most detailed knowledge available of Johnson's daily existence comes from the *Anecdotes* which Hester Thrale (then Piozzi) compiled after his death, drawing on their intimacy in the last fifteen years of his life. It has even been speculated that he engaged in masochistic practices with Hester. The evidence for this includes a mysterious padlock left in her care in 1768; a line in Johnson's diary for 1771, referring in Latin to some 'mad reflection on shackles and hand-cuffs' (Johnson, *Yale Edition*, 1.140); and a strange letter in French, which he addressed to her in June 1773 (*Letters*, 2.38–9) and which alludes persistently to bondage. The suggestion may go along with other 'dark hints' in the biography by Sir John Hawkins (1787) that Johnson harboured some guilty secret about his sexual past. In the present state of knowledge it is impossible to confirm or deny the stories.

Altogether, as he moved through his fifties, Johnson was travelling more. He began to pay regular visits to his old haunts in Lichfield, Birmingham, Ashbourne, and Oxford, meeting long-standing friends such as Hector, Taylor, and William Adams. A further contact in the midlands was the local poet Anna Seward; her father, a canon of Lichfield, was married to a daughter of the schoolmaster John Hunter. In later years Anna turned violently against Johnson. Other trips took him to Lincolnshire, to Northamptonshire, and to Cambridge, where he conversed on the subject of his old acquaintance Christopher Smart. As he became less rooted in the metropolis, and found himself distracted by his social engagements, his literary productivity slowed in the 1760s, with only a few smaller items such as his exposure of the notorious Cock Lane ghost in February 1762. This brought on him the obloquy of Charles Churchill, a dissolute clergyman and friend of Wilkes, who possessed great skill as a satirist; Johnson found it hard to live down his sneering portrayal of the overbearing Pomposo. One of the more effective thrusts in Churchill's poem, *The Ghost*, concerns the long-delayed edition of Shakespeare:

He for subscribers baits his hook,
And takes their cash—but where's the book?

At last Johnson completed his work, and he was able to meet his critics in the eye when publication took place in October 1765. The eight volumes contain the full canon of accepted plays by Shakespeare, excluding *Pericles*, but none of the poems; the volumes are famous for pithy textual commentary, as well as discreet analysis of earlier editions. They contain decisive critical judgments on each play, with a masterly aside on Falstaff and a candid admission by the editor of his feelings of shock at the death of Cordelia, together with a humanely poised preface. The work further confirmed Johnson's stature, and a second edition was soon required. He obtained a total of £475 for the two editions. During the summer Johnson had received the degree of doctor of laws from Dublin University, thus permitting the designation 'Dr Johnson' which has been his regular public appellation ever since. He moved house again, taking his strange menagerie along with him to another lodging off Fleet Street which happened to be named Johnson's Court.

Although he was now comfortably into middle age, Johnson retained a sprightly and almost boyish side. With his younger friends Beauclerk and Langton he had always been ready for a 'frisk' at any hour of the day or

night. According to one story he used to walk the streets at night with the Italian writer Giuseppe Baretti; there was a strange sequel in October 1769 when Baretti found himself charged with committing a murder in the Haymarket. The Johnson circle turned out in force to support their friend, and to give character references in court when he was tried at the Old Bailey. Their evidence had its effect, as Baretti was acquitted on the grounds of self-defence. More opportunities for relaxation arose when Johnson met Hester Thrale: he spent many happy hours improvising light verse and playing with her children, especially the precocious Hester Maria, known as Queeney. A great believer in pleasure, he commended innocent amusements and refused to join the fashionable clamour against the dissipations of luxury. He understood the therapeutic benefit of trifling pursuits, and as he 'delighted in exercising his mind on the science of numbers' (Boswell, *Life*, 3.207) he took great satisfaction in performing feats of mental arithmetic when feeling disturbed. Among his numerous pieces of miscellaneous writing in middle life was introductory material to the first book in English on the game of draughts, written by William Payne, 'teacher of mathematics' (1756). Characteristically Johnson remarked in his dedication, 'The same skill, and often the same degree of skill, is exerted in great and little things'.

By February 1766 Boswell had returned from an extended grand tour, and from then on he contrived to spend a good deal of time with his idol whenever he could escape his responsibilities in Scotland. The importunate Boswell arranged for Johnson's circle of acquaintance to grow. Sometimes this was agreeable, as when the Corsican patriot Pasquale Paoli was presented to Johnson in October 1769; sometimes it took more manipulation, as when Boswell lured him into dining in company with John Wilkes on 15 May 1776—a meeting Johnson enjoyed more than he expected. Another young friend was Robert Chambers, who succeeded Sir William Blackstone in 1766 as Vinerian professor of law at Oxford. Chambers found great difficulty in producing the lectures required by his post, and Johnson travelled to the university to assist in their composition. His role remained virtually an unbroken secret until the 1980s. He lent support generously to other scholars, often supplying dedications anonymously, and advising Percy in the compilation of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). At the end of 1768 Johnson rejoiced to see Joshua Reynolds installed as the first president of the Royal Academy, an

event that was quickly followed by a knighthood, and in the following year he himself became an honorary professor in ancient literature at the academy. Though never deeply versed in painting, he attended the presidential lectures Reynolds delivered at regular intervals, and gave his friend some help when these were published collectively as *Discourses*.

However, it was the Literary Club, formed at the instigation of Reynolds in 1764, that saw Johnson's intellect shining most radiantly in a semi-public forum. One of the founder members, John Hawkins, grated on his colleagues and soon left the group. Johnson had no regrets, as he thought Hawkins a brute and, worse, 'a most unclubable man' (*Diary and Letters*, 1.40–41). During Johnson's lifetime the group expanded from nine to thirty-five, and he had little relish for the company of some newcomers: Adam Smith was one with whom he apparently preferred not to consort. Nevertheless, he attended quite faithfully as long as health permitted, and served as the focus of conversation and collegiality. Many of the most distinguished minds of the age came together in the club, even though women were excluded and political and social factors ruled out men such as John Wilkes and Joseph Priestley. Leading practitioners in almost every field became members, ranging from Reynolds, Burke, Garrick, Goldsmith, Boswell, Burney, Edward Gibbon, Smith, Percy, and Chambers to the politicians Charles James Fox and William Windham, the orientalist William Jones, the dramatists Richard Brinsley Sheridan and George Colman, the Shakespearian scholars Edmond Malone and George Steevens, the writers Joseph and Thomas Warton, the virtuosi Lord Charlemont and Sir William Hamilton, the lawyer William Scott, and the scientist Joseph Banks. Yet every one of these willingly ceded pre-eminence to Johnson, who was able to cow even the most self-confident speakers such as Burke, Fox, and Garrick into submission. This he did less by purely aggressive behaviour than by his stunning range of knowledge, his speed of thought, his verbal articulateness, and his command of argumentative technique. The club had no agenda, no platform, and no transactions to record, but it left an indelible mark on the high culture of the age.

Home and Abroad

As a new decade opened, Johnson—now into his sixties—turned again to politics. A serious proposal came from William Strahan, the publisher of major works by Adam Smith, David Hume, and William Robertson, that

Johnson should join him as a member of parliament. In 1771 Strahan recommended his friend to the Treasury as one with 'perfect good affection to his Majesty'. It was a long shot, and nothing came of this bold initiative, even though Burke gave it as his opinion that, had Johnson entered the Commons early in life, he would have proved himself 'the greatest speaker that ever was there' (Boswell, *Life*, 2.137–9). At this point Johnson chose to resume the career as a political writer which he had largely abandoned a generation earlier. His first pamphlet, *The False Alarm*, published on 17 January 1770, dealt with the struggle between parliament and the renegade member John Wilkes, and put the government case with wit and energy. In the following year he wrote *Thoughts* on a territorial dispute between Spain and Britain concerning the Falkland Islands, issued on 26 March 1774. In *The Patriot*, which came out on 12 October 1774, he backed Lord North's ministry against Wilkites and other opposition groups, in the hope of assisting Henry Thrale to retain his parliamentary seat in Southwark, as did indeed occur. The last pamphlet in this sequence, *Taxation No Tyranny* (issued on 8 March 1775), was concerned with the thorny question of American independence, then just on the point of boiling over into violent insurrection. Yet amid this activity Johnson had not abandoned his old role as lexicographer: in 1773 he supervised publication of a revised 'fourth' version of his *Dictionary*, incorporating many important additions in its coverage. A fresh edition of the Shakespeare edition appeared in the same year, with help from George Steevens. At this time Johnson's physical condition and psychological health were equally fragile; his old bouts of melancholy sometimes returned to plague him. He spent much of his time with the Thrales, often visiting them in their new house at Brighton.

However, it was a much longer expedition that did most to raise his spirits. In August 1773 he set off on a three-month journey to the highlands and islands of Scotland, in company with the assiduous Boswell, who had set up the trip. Together with a servant, the two men travelled up the east coast from Edinburgh via St Andrews and Aberdeen, reaching Inverness on 28 August; from this point they encountered a much harsher world, necessitating some rugged hikes over desolate mountain regions. Passing through the western highlands to Skye, the voyagers repeatedly came across vestiges of the epic events of 1745–6, when Prince Charles Edward had mounted his unsuccessful rising and then undertaken his desperate

flight through the heather. Johnson and Boswell spent a month on Skye, their stay prolonged by bad weather. Next they proceeded through the Inner Hebrides to Iona and Mull before they returned to the mainland on 22 October, not without relief after some perilous moments on their journey. They visited Glasgow and Auchinleck, Boswell's family home, before they got back to Edinburgh on 9 November. This courageous venture into an almost uncharted world resulted in two extraordinary books. Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) has the chatty informality of a 'rough' guide: its focus is on Johnson, as it describes his charged encounters with the native population, whether humble cottagers or important personages like Lord Monboddo and Boswell's formidable father Lord Auchinleck. Johnson's very different work, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, was published in January 1775; it earned him 200 guineas, as well as the admiration of George III and considerable success in terms of sales. While on the trip, Johnson had not thought it beneath himself to engage in horseplay, imitating a kangaroo (which James Cook's first voyage had recently brought to the attention of the West) and allowing Boswell to dress him up in highland costume; but the book shows nothing of these episodes.

The *Journey* aroused some adverse comment in Scotland, on account of its alleged bias against the nation, but Johnson was able to shrug off most of this criticism. In the text he had treated with disdain the supposed epics of the ancient Gaelic warrior-bard Ossian, describing the exploits of his father, Fingal, which had become an exemplar of sublime and unclassical writing. Johnson expressed his view that the poems were in fact a modern concoction by their 'editor', James Macpherson. When an incensed Macpherson complained about this treatment, Johnson repeated his challenge for the original manuscripts to be produced, if they could be. Macpherson's demand for retraction produced a famous response in which Johnson defied his opponent in the face of his 'impudent and foolish' letter. Such quarrels aside, the book is a profound meditation on the nature of primitive society, especially on one reliant on an oral culture; Johnson confronts a realm of experience foreign to the Enlightenment illuminati of London and Edinburgh, including a Gaelic legacy and vestiges of a Catholic past, as well as a degree of poverty and deprivation. The *Journey* stands as one of its author's most eloquent and challenging works, a great document of cultural studies before the topic was invented.

In the following year Johnson embarked on a more modest venture. Virtually the whole of the three months from July to September was devoted to a tour of north Wales, the home country of Hester Thrale. She joined the party along with her husband and the nine-year-old Queeney, who had long been a favourite with Johnson. This trip was less eventful than its predecessor, although there were significant stops at Lichfield and Ashbourne when the travellers met Lucy Porter, Anna Seward, and John Taylor, as well as a long-time friend, Mary Cobb, and the doctor and writer Erasmus Darwin. Johnson never turned the journal he kept into a book, although it was ultimately published in 1816; Hester Thrale wrote her own account. The final jaunt took place from September to November 1775, when the Thrales and their language tutor Giuseppe Baretti took Johnson to Paris—the sole occasion on which he left Britain. Johnson left only brief notes concerning the journey, while Hester wrote a fuller report: the accounts were published together as *The French Journals of Mrs Thrale and Dr Johnson* (1932).

Plans were subsequently laid to fulfil an ambition Johnson had long held when the Thrales and Baretti arranged to conduct him to Italy in 1776. The scheme perished when the Thrales lost their only surviving son at the age of nine, so that Johnson never made his anticipated journey to the centre of Christendom. Equally, his life had been saddened by the sudden death of Goldsmith on 4 April 1774. Against this he made some new friends among the learned ladies of the day, including Hannah More when she went to London in 1774. In March 1777 he met Frances, known as Fanny, the daughter of his old acquaintance Dr Charles Burney. Her spectacular début as a novelist with *Evelina* (1778) was encouraged by Johnson, as well as by the Thrales and their friends, and she continued to delight the circle in the following years. Another occasion of pride was the award in March 1775 of a doctorate from Johnson's alma mater. The memory of his reckless and severely curtailed spell in the university was now largely effaced.

The year 1776 witnessed great events in the world, and despite his frustration over the Italian trip Johnson too found his life full of incident. He moved a small distance to his last home at 8 Bolt Court, located in yet another alley leading off Fleet Street. A springtime ramble to Oxford, Lichfield, and Ashbourne is known from a detailed report by Boswell, who was permitted to accompany his elderly friend. Another jaunt followed to Bath, to see the Thrales: while there Johnson and Boswell took the chance

of visiting Bristol, where they met Hannah More and investigated the store of manuscripts left by Thomas Chatterton, whose Rowley poems had become a *cause célèbre* of the day. Late in the year Johnson was in Brighton with the Thrales, but his health was not good. The following year saw a similar pattern: spells of sickness, interrupted by a journey to Oxford and to the midlands where he was joined for a memorable week in Ashbourne by Boswell, whose account of this episode forms a high point in the *Life*. In the summer Johnson's other main concern had been the expected execution of the Revd William Dodd, who had been convicted of forgery; even though Johnson had only a slight acquaintance with Dodd, he threw himself energetically into an unsuccessful campaign to save the clergyman's life. By comparison the following year was uneventful, although it did feature one immortal sequence in Boswell's narrative, describing an unexpected meeting between Johnson and a forgotten college mate from his early days at Oxford, named Oliver Edwards. Though basically comic, it is an episode fraught with a range of human emotions, as Johnson struggles to recapture his youthful self amid the trite importunities of his contemporary.

The Last Phase

As he approached seventy Johnson underwent more distressing experiences. The death of Garrick on 20 January 1779 was followed by a resplendent funeral at Westminster Abbey, which the Literary Club attended in full force. Johnson himself was in poor health and repeatedly under the doctor's care. Then in June Henry Thrale suffered the first of a number of severe strokes from which he never fully recovered. The brewery had long been mismanaged by the indolent Thrale, and for much of the time Johnson had to help Hester to keep it afloat. None the less the old man was able to initiate one more literary project, which proved to be the ultimate success in his career. This took the form of a series of prefaces to a new collection of the English poets, best-known today as *The Lives of the Poets*. In a contract signed on 29 March 1777, Johnson had agreed with a consortium of booksellers to supply 'a concise account' of some fifty poets: he undertook to do the work for £200, and though he eventually received twice this amount it is generally accepted that he could have held out for a much bigger sum. The first instalment came out in March 1779, the second in 1780, and the third in May 1781. Although Johnson's brusque treatment

of well-connected nonentities gave rise to some hostile commentary, his major lives were quickly recognized as setting a new standard for English literary biography. In particular, the surveys of Cowley, Milton, Dryden, Swift, and Pope exemplify Johnson's serious concern with the deepest springs of creativity, as well as his ability to explore with considerable insight some individuals whose character and work aroused profound antipathy in him. Even in an age of greater theoretical sophistication, his reading of mainstream poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains canonical, by reason of its attention to verbal detail, its decisive judgments, and its robust expression.

One aspect of Johnson's career illustrated by the *Lives* is the good state of relations he maintained with the London publishing world. Born into the family of a bookseller, he enjoyed a close affinity with many of the leading figures in the trade—from Cave and Dodsley through to Andrew Millar, Thomas Longman, and William Strahan. Several of these men were personal friends: Strahan acted as his banker in later years, and the Revd George Strahan, son of the publisher, edited Johnson's prayers in 1785. A number of his later volumes were issued by Thomas Cadell, among the most respected booksellers of the age. Johnson was equally intimate with printers such as Richardson and Edmund Allen. It is natural that he should be regarded as an exemplary figure in the history of the book, one who helped to develop a strong publishing industry while advancing his own literary career by exploiting the market forces of the day.

Despite the triumphant achievement of the *Lives*, the shades were closing in on Johnson. He lost more of his friends—Beauclerk in 1780, the enfeebled Henry Thrale in 1781, and then successively his long-time housemates Levet in 1782 and Anna Williams in 1783. One result was the noble elegy '*On the Death of Dr Levet*', commending the useful life of this rough and dishevelled individual. Johnson's own health deteriorated steadily, with emphysema and dropsy added to the list of ailments. On 17 June 1783 he suffered a stroke and was rendered speechless for two days. Gradually he recovered from this blow, and he thought for a while that his general health had taken a turn for the better. But the respite was not long. A painful tumour on the scrotum made his last days excruciating, even after some courageous surgery performed by the patient on himself. It became apparent to his friends that he was unlikely to live long. In June 1784, after consulting Reynolds and other friends, Boswell approached Lord

Chancellor Thurlow for the grant of a royal pension to enable the invalid to spend some time in Italy, as he dreaded the English winter, but eventually plans fell through.

One more incident clouded Johnson's final days: for a while it had been apparent that Hester Thrale was seeking to detach herself from her old friend. Any decision on her part to remarry in 1784 might well have brought a jealous reaction from Johnson, but when he learned that her new husband was to be the singing teacher Gabriel Piozzi—poor, Italian, and Catholic—his repressed feelings burst out. On 2 July he wrote her a short and bitter letter upbraiding her on the step she had 'ignominiously' taken (*Letters*, 4.338). The marriage took place on 23 July, and the Piozzis left for the continent at the start of September, with the breach between the two old friends only partially healed. For the remainder of her long life Hester Piozzi revered the memory of Johnson and did much to keep his name before the public. As for Boswell, his own final meeting with Johnson took place on 30 June, when the old man walked away into Bolt Court for ever 'with a kind of pathetick briskness' (Boswell, *Life*, 4.339). Once the news of Johnson's death reached Boswell back in Edinburgh, he was left deeply distressed. This was one reason why it took him years to make progress on the biography in which he had invested so much for so long.

The last months of Johnson's life were diversified by an occasional social outing, including dinners at the Literary Club as late as June 1784, as well as evenings with a new group which began to meet at the Essex Head tavern, off the Strand, late in 1783 [see Essex Head Club]. He was able to make visits to Lichfield, Ashbourne, and Oxford, completing cycles of alliance and attachment which went back well over fifty years. But his illness grew worse, and on 8 December 1784 he made his final will, with a codicil on the following day. As he sank into death, numerous friends including Reynolds, Langton, Windham, and Burney called on him at 8 Bolt Court: at first he spoke about his spiritual condition, and then towards the end he lay composedly, enduring the pain with calm resignation. About seven in the evening on 13 December he died at his home, without any struggle, supposedly after uttering the words 'iam moriturus' ('now about to die'). He was seventy-five. His funeral and burial took place at Westminster Abbey on 20 December. A monument, to which his friends subscribed, was erected in St Paul's Cathedral in 1796. In his will he made many bequests to his friends, leaving the residue of the estate to his servant Francis Barber.

His library of some 3000 volumes was sold by James Christie the elder on 16–19 February 1785, realizing £242.

Johnson and Posterity

Already a celebrity in his lifetime, Johnson was catapulted into further fame by his death. Half a dozen biographers quickly launched themselves on the market, so that the *Anecdotes* of Hester Piozzi (1786) and the life by Sir John Hawkins (1787) entered what was already a crowded and contentious field. However, it was the appearance of Boswell's magisterial biography (1791), filled with a new density of personal detail, that made the quiddities of a single individual so familiar to an immense range of readers. In the early nineteenth century Thomas Babington Macaulay gave a faintly comic reading of Johnson, deploring his bigotry while commending his mental powers, and Thomas Carlyle hailed the sage as a tragic hero embodying the destiny of the man of letters. Both these writers wove their assessments around reviews of Boswell's life, and for generations it was this 'Johnsoniad', as Carlyle termed it, that kept alive the picture of Johnson as a doughty and difficult man, battling with resilience and good humour against the onslaughts of fate. In this guise he has turned up as a character in novels, films, and television comedies, and has even made a fictional appearance as a private investigator. Overall it is not altogether a false picture, even though commentary in the second half of the twentieth century sought to roll back this stereotypical view. Academic scholarship has gone a long way to reclaim Johnson as a serious figure in intellectual history, but a stubborn popular image has grown up of a learned and aggressive conversationalist, brawling against his friends and adversaries with a bad temper but a tender heart. This version of Sam Johnson contains enough glimmerings of the complex truth to survive even today.

Almost 6 feet tall and raw-boned, Johnson towered over most of his contemporaries. His physique was as clumsy as his appearance was unprepossessing: he had a face disfigured by scrofula, and a body afflicted by involuntary convulsions. He suffered too from defective eyesight and hearing. More disconcertingly, his behaviour was marked by odd grunts and head-rolling, and despite heroic efforts at politeness, his manners and personal habits struck fastidious people as gross. A lengthening list of ailments finally made his invalid condition obvious to everyone, and often

his psychological distress caused him to look still more peculiar in company. On first introduction, Johnson appeared to William Hogarth an 'idiot', until the monstrous figure began to speak with such eloquence that he seemed rather to be inspired (Boswell, *Life*, 1.147). He even contrived to master physical activities like swimming, rowing, and riding, and more than once gave evidence of prowess with his fists in self-defence. His whole life was a triumph of the mind over the recalcitrant body, a victory of an inspired savage over the timid proprieties of good breeding and complacent orthodoxy.

Wracked by acute states of anxiety and depression, doubtful of his own industry, Johnson produced works of immense scope and energy. Uncertain of his own salvation, he lived a life of almost exemplary piety. Humble before God and respectful of established authority, he was without a grain of snobbery. Never rich, he behaved with the utmost generosity to the poor, whose condition he viewed without sentimentality. He showed kindness towards the weak and the lowly, children, and animals, his attitude to the last reflected in a gesture of gruff affection towards his cat Hodge. Even his attitude to women could be called fairly enlightened by the standards of the time. Nothing is more indicative of his nature than his tenderness towards beggars and prostitutes. The *Life* contains one 'well attested' example, when Johnson found a poor woman of the town lying exhausted in the street, carried her home, and had her taken into care for a long period 'at considerable expense' (Boswell, *Life*, 4.321–2). On the other hand he had the purest scorn for foolish idlers, however well connected socially, and he showed himself willing to defy the proprieties by delivering a verbal battery on the person of Lord Chesterfield, one of the most punctilious and blue-blooded members of the aristocracy. Often irascible, he seldom bore a grudge.

Johnson was arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history. His range as a writer is astonishing: he excelled in criticism, satire, biography, the moral essay, fiction, scholarly editing, travel writing, political pamphleteering, journalism, and lexicography. He produced distinguished poetry both in English and in Latin. Apart from this, he composed noteworthy sermons, impressive prayers, a moving diary, and superb letters. Although he did not write any sustained historical work, his library was full of books dealing with the ancient world, besides medieval and modern Europe: much of his output shows the extent of his

immersion in the study of the past. Well versed in the law, theology, and medicine, plus several branches of science and practical endeavour, he had the logical rigour of an advocate, the common sense of a successful businessman (as his role in shoring up the Thrales' brewery indicates), the hands-on abilities of an engineer, and the curiosity of a research chemist. He survives both as the fount of amusing and instructive anecdotes, a tribute to his human worth, and as the author of enduring masterpieces, a tribute to his intellectual distinction. Outside Shakespeare, perhaps no one in English history has become such a representative figure of his age, and no one has done more to dignify the literary profession in Britain.

Sources

- Boswell, *Life*
- *The Yale edition of the works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. A.T. Hazen and others, 13 vols. (1958–) [in progress]
- *The letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. B. Redford, 5 vols. (1992–4)
- A.L. Reade, *Johnsonian gleanings*, 11 vols. (1909–52)
- G.B. Hill, ed., *Johnsonian miscellanies*, 2 vols. (1897)
- H.L. Piozzi, *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson*, ed. S.C. Roberts (1932)
- J.L. Clifford, *Young Sam Johnson* (1955)
- J.L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson: Samuel Johnson's middle years* (1979)
- J.D. Fleeman and J. McLaverty, *A bibliography of the works of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols. (2000)
- *The works of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, 12 vols. (1823)
- P. Rogers, *The Johnson encyclopedia* (1996)
- N. Page, *A Dr Johnson chronology* (1990)
- *Diary and letters of Madame D'Arblay*, ed. [C. Barrett], 7 vols. (1842–6)
- *Thraliana: the diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776–1809*, ed. K.C. Balderston, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (1951)
- T. Kaminski, *The early career of Samuel Johnson* (1987)
- J. Hawkins, *The life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. B.H. Davis (New York, 1961)

Wealth at Death

approximately £2300; residuary legatee (F. Barber) received approx. £1500: will, Hawkins, *Life*

Further Reading from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

- [This entry](#)
- [Boswell, James](#)
- [Johnson's Literary Club](#)
- [Barber, Francis](#)

For more on the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, visit www.oxforddnb.com.