

Samuel Johnson

Biographical sketch

Next only to William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson is perhaps the most quoted of English writers. The latter part of the eighteenth century is often called the Age of Johnson.

Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, England, in 1709. His mother did not have enough milk for him, and so he was put out to nurse. From his nurse he contracted a tubercular infection leaving him deaf in the left ear, almost blind in the left eye, and dim of vision in the right eye. It also left scar tissue which disfigured his face, as did a later childhood bout with small-pox.

Young Johnson responded to his disabilities by a fierce determination to be independent and to accept help and pity from no one. He had an uncle who was a local boxing champion, and who taught him to fight, so that years later he walked without fear in the worst sections of London. Once four robbers attacked him, and he held his own until the watch arrived and arrested them.

Sports where he had to see a ball were out of the question. He turned instead to swimming, leaping, and climbing. In his seventies, revisiting his native Lichfield, he looked for a rail that he used to jump over as a boy, and having found it, he laid aside his hat and wig, and his coat, and leaped over it twice, a feat that left him, as he said, "in a transport of joy".

When he was eight years old, he stopped going to church, and abandoned his religion. A few years later, however, he began to think that it was wrong of him to do so without investigating the matter, and the pangs of guilt he had over not having read theology before rejecting it brought him to the conclusion that there must be a Moral Law (else what is guilt about?) and hence a Lawgiver.

As a youth, he developed a fondness for disputation, and often, as he admits, chose the wrong side of the debate because it would be more challenging.

In October, 1728, having just turned nineteen, Johnson entered Pembroke College, Oxford. His mother had inherited a lump sum which was enough to pay for a year at Oxford, and he had a prospect of further aid. But the prospect fell through, and after one year Johnson was forced to drop out of Oxford.

While at Oxford, Johnson read Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees, With an Enquiry Into the Origin of Moral Virtue*. Mandeville argues (among many other things) that what are commonly called virtues are disguised vices. This made a deep impression on Johnson, and made him watchful for corruption in his own motives.

A more fundamental influence was that of William Law's book *Serious Call To a Devout and*

Holy Life. Johnson reports that he "began to read it expecting to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry."

As his first year at Oxford was ending, his money was running out. He had only one pair of shoes, and his toes showed through the ends. A gentleman, seeing this, placed a new pair of shoes outside Johnson's door at night, and Johnson, finding them in the morning, threw them away in a fit of shame and wounded pride.

In December, 1729, with his fees well in arrears, Johnson was forced to leave Oxford. He wrote a short poem, *The Young Author*, dealing with the dreams of greatness of someone just starting to write, and the almost certain destruction of those dreams. The moral is: "Do not let yourself hope for much, and you will be the less disappointed."

Out of Oxford, with no hope of the academic career for which his native talents suited him, Johnson sank for two years into a deep depression, a despair and inability to act, wherein, as he later told a friend, he could stare at the town clock and not be able to tell what time it was. He feared that he was falling into insanity, and considered suicide. He developed convulsive tics, jerks, and twitches, that remained with him for the remainder of his life, and often caused observers who did not know him to think him an idiot.

In his depressed state, Johnson met the Porters. Mr. Porter was a prosperous merchant. He and his family valued Johnson's company and conversation, and were not put off by his appearance and mannerisms. Mrs. Porter said to her daughter, after first meeting Johnson, "That is the most sensible man I ever met." From the Porters, Johnson gained renewed self-confidence, and largely emerged from his depressed state. After the death of Henry Porter, his wife Elizabeth ("Tetty", as Johnson came to call her) encouraged Johnson into a closer friendship, and in 1735 they were married. She was 20 years older than he, and brought to the marriage a dowry of over 600 pounds. In those days the interest alone on such a sum would have been almost enough for the couple to live on. There is every indication that it was a love match on both sides. On Tetty's side, the love was reinforced by the perception of future greatness. On Johnson's side, the love was reinforced by gratitude toward the woman whose approval and acceptance had given him back his sanity and self-respect.

The newly-married Johnson undertook to open a private school, Edial Hall. One of his first students was David Garrick, who became a lifelong friend and was later known as the foremost actor of his day. The school closed a little over a year later, having failed to attract enough pupils. Johnson had invested most of his wife's dowry in it, hoping to multiply her capital. Instead, he lost nearly all of it, leaving them desperately poor. Johnson and Garrick determined

to seek their fortune in London. When they arrived, Johnson had twopence halfpenny in his pocket, and Garrick three halfpence. Johnson began to do small writing jobs for Edward Cave, publisher of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, the first example of a magazine in the modern sense.

In the next few years, he wrote articles on demand for the *Gentleman's Magazine* and other publications. As his biographer Bate puts it, there are "short biographies of men noted in medicine, science, literature, naval exploration, and warfare; poems in both Latin and English; monthly articles... on... political and other current events abroad... and other writings that show his knowledge not only of literature, politics, religion, and ethics, but also agriculture, trade, and practical business; philology, classical scholarship, aesthetics, and metaphysics; medicine and chemistry; travel, exploration, and even Chinese architecture."

Johnson's interests extended to science and technology as well as to literature. When Richard Arkwright invented (or improved) the automatic spinning machine that was to revolutionize the textile industry, he found that Johnson was the only one of his acquaintances that understood the principle at once, without explanation.

In April of 1738, Parliament forbade reporting of Parliamentary debates. The *Gentleman's Magazine* got around this by printing supposedly fictitious reports of debates in the Parliament of Lilliput, with the names of the Lilliputian speakers being thinly disguised versions of the names of English politicians. Johnson became the chief writer of these speeches. Knowing only the measure that was being debated, and who had spoken on each side, he considered what arguments the speaker was likely to use, and wrote a suitable speech for him. For years, these were assumed by the public to be the speeches that had actually been given in Parliament. No member of Parliament ever complained that he had been misrepresented, presumably because when he read the speeches attributed to him, he thought, "I wish I had said that!" Years later, some of Johnson's work appeared in books about Pitt (Walpole, Chesterfield) as examples of that politician's "Greatest Speeches."

Before 1748, Johnson published practically nothing under his own name. He wrote extensively - the Parliamentary Debates, the poem *London*, numerous articles, a few sermons and other speeches for which the speakers took the credit, and the like. But none of this could be expected to give him a reputation as a writer or scholar, either in his own day or in the eyes of posterity.

He made one last effort to obtain permission to practice law even though he had not a degree. It was refused. He began work on a *Dictionary of the English Language*.

The Italians had a national dictionary, published in 1612, which it had taken their academy 20 years to prepare. The French followed with their dictionary which it took an Academy of forty scholars 55 years (1639-1694) to prepare, and another 18 (1700-1718) to revise. It was agreed

that England needed a first-rate dictionary, and Johnson undertook the job. In June 1746 he signed an agreement with a group of publishers. They would pay him 1575 pounds (all expenses to come out of this). With six copyists to help him, he read through numerous books by "standard authors" and marked their use of various words. His copyists then copied out the sentences onto slips of paper, underlining the word being illustrated, marked the slip with a large letter for the initial of the word, and filed it. Johnson then wrote definitions for over 40,000 words, with different shades of meaning, illustrating the meanings with about 114,000 quotations that he had gathered. His work has served as the basis for all English dictionaries since. A comparison of their definitions with his shows obvious borrowing, simply because his definitions are good.

The New English Dictionary (now the Oxford English Dictionary), on which literally thousands of scholars collaborated (not all of them full-time), took seventy years to complete. Johnson, in one room with mostly borrowed books and six copyists, completed his task in nine years. The Dictionary was published in 1755. Oxford University rewarded him with a Master of Arts degree, which came in time for him to include it on the title page of the Dictionary. Many doors had previously been closed to him by the absence of a college degree. That problem was now behind him.

In 1777 a group of booksellers decided to publish a series of volumes of recent (since 1660) English poets. They asked Johnson to write a biographical sketch of each poet (a list of 47 names, later expanded to 52) for inclusion in the volumes. He agreed to do so for 200 guineas. They were envisioning perhaps two or three pages on each poet. He gave them about 370,000 words in all, simply because, once he got started, he enjoyed the work, and thought it worth while. The project took four years, being completed in 1781.

Johnson died quietly on the evening of Monday 13 December 1784. His friend William Gerard Hamilton, member of Parliament, said: "He has made a chasm which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up. - Johnson is dead. - Let us go to the next best: - There is nobody; - no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson."

was modelled on the Latin dictionary of Robert Ainsworth (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 43), published in 1736, and it greatly impressed Johnson (Hitchings 2005: 76). Martin was a mathematician, and he included 'figures and diagrams, particularly for geometrical terms' (McDermott 2005: 185). His dictionary was very interesting, but it only had a second edition, in 1754.

2.3.2 Samuel Johnson

The main event in the evolution of English lexicography in the eighteenth century was the publication of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1755. Johnson, 'wholly unknown to the public, because all his work had been published anonymously' (McAdam and Milne 1963: vii), had taken up an idea that was current among many intellectuals of the time and that some publishers were ready to back: to produce an authoritative dictionary of the English language. He started work in 1746, and in 1747 he published his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, addressed to 'the Right Honorable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield'.⁴⁰ He had signed a contract with a consortium of booksellers that granted him money to pay his expenses, including six amanuenses,⁴¹ whose job was to copy his notes and annotations of the texts he consulted. He had been allowed a period of preparation of three years, but the dictionary was published after nine years, on 15 April 1755, under the title *A Dictionary of the English Language, in which the Words are deduced from their Originals, and illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the best Writers... By Samuel Johnson, A.M.* (Plate 5).⁴² It was bound 'in two large folio volumes, each the size of a lectern Bible' (McAdam and Milne 1963: viii) or in four volumes (Hitchings 2005: 192).⁴³ The first page of the dictionary text (not the cover) bore the title *A General Dictionary of the English Language*. It had about 42,000 entries, a *Preface* that has been almost unanimously praised as one of the best expressions of the problems of lexicography, a brief history of the English language and a grammar. A copy was sent to the French Academy—which gives an idea of the ambitions of the author—and

⁴⁰ Reproduced in Fontenelle (2008a).

⁴¹ One of whom had worked on the fourth and fifth editions of Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (Hitchings 2005: 62).

⁴² For *Artium Magister*. Johnson is often called *Dr Johnson*, but he never took a university degree. He was awarded an M.A. by the University of Oxford on 20 February 1755, when the text of the dictionary was finished and ready to be published. The sixth edition (1785) has 'By Samuel Johnson, LL.D.' (Congleton and Congleton 1984: 79).

⁴³ The dictionary is available on a CD-ROM edited by Anne McDermott in 1996 at Cambridge University Press (see Osselton 2005). There are also abridged paper editions (McAdam and Milne 1963/1982; Lynch 2004; Crystal 2005).

the Academy in turn 'promised to repay with a new edition of its own masterpiece as soon as the new edition should appear', which it did in 1761 (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 146).

Johnson's dictionary has been closely examined and extensively commented upon. Some have claimed that Johnson was the inventor of modern lexicography, others that he was only following in the steps of his predecessors; some have said that he exerted a profound influence on the evolution of the English language while for others that influence was negligible. As usual, the truth is probably somewhere in between: Johnson did not invent much, but he brought together different elements that had never been assembled before in any single dictionary of English, and he added generous portions of his immense culture and strong personality. In that sense he is undoubtedly one of the leading figures—if not *the* leading figure—in the history of English lexicography.

Johnson's *Dictionary* had two clearly defined objectives: to explain 'the words and phrases used in the general intercourse of life, or found in the works of those whom we commonly style polite writers' (*Preface*), and 'to preserve the purity, and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom' (*Preface*). Thus it was both descriptive and prescriptive (see below). Johnson had all the words that he could find in acceptable sources, hard words and common words, except those that he considered improper, and he also had compounds, phrasal verbs, phrases, etc., which he treated with particular care, one of the features for which his dictionary was remarkable (Osselton 1986). He had many technical and scientific terms as well as dialect words (Plate 6).

Johnson added comments and labels in many entries to indicate what he thought was good usage. Cassidy (1997: 105–6) counted the number of times various labels expressing disapproval⁴⁴ were used: he found 217 occurrences of *low*,⁴⁵ 96 of *improper*, 94 of *corrupt*, 94 of *cant*, 38 of *barbarous*, 32 of *ludicrous*, 27 of *erroneous*, etc. There were also *affected*, *bad*, *burlesque*, *colloquial*, *inelegant*, *provincial*, *uncircumstantial*, *vile*, *vitious*, *wanton*, etc. together with *impropriety*, *without authority*, *ignorantly*, *scarce English*, and the occasional picturesque phrase such as *neither elegant nor necessary*, or *not yet received*, *nor is it wanted*, *colloquial barbarism*, *ought not to be admitted into the language*, *unworthy of use*, etc. (Hitchings 2005: 132–4). The words that were condemned included *to belabour*, *to budge*, *to cajole*, *cheery*, *to coax*, *conundrum*, *to doff*, *to dumbfound*, *extraordinary*, *fuss*, *gambler*, *glum*, *ignoramus*, *nowadays*, *posse*, *shabby*, *simpleton*,

⁴⁴ Osselton (2006) notes that Johnson had envisaged indicating register and approval/disapproval via a set of typographical signs (*, †, °, etc.) like some of his predecessors, but eventually chose to use labels.

⁴⁵ Osselton (2006: 100) finds 223.

spick and span, to squabble, tiny, touchy, trait, to volunteer, width, etc. (see Sledd and Kolb 1955: 37). There were also laudatory labels: *a good word, elegant and useful, elegant and expressive, etc.* (Hitchings 2005: 135).

Yet Johnson's influence on language was limited (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 27 *ff.*). In spite of his personal prestige and of the prestige of his dictionary, the words that he had condemned did not all suffer: some disappeared from usage, but neither more nor less than other words that he had not condemned, and some have survived: *abominable, antiquity, etc.* His only influence was in the domain of spelling, and even this was limited (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 33, 137): he had entries for *aille, dasy, sithe, etc.*

Like all lexicographers, Johnson used earlier dictionaries: Phillips's *New World of Words* (Lancashire 2005: 157), Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum*, Ainsworth's Latin *Thesaurus* (mentioned 584 times),⁴⁶ Bailey's *Universal* (197 times), and there were occasional references to the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*,⁴⁷ Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (for which his father was among the early subscribers)⁴⁸ and many others. He also consulted Martin's *Lingua Britannica Reformata*, which had been published in 1749 when he had already started work. Many of his entries and definitions were inspired by those dictionaries, though his debts were not always acknowledged: there are '1,144 references to "Dict."... especially common in the first few letters' (Hitchings 2005: 247, who refers to De Vries 1994).⁴⁹

Johnson's definitions were considered 'terse, stylish, and sometimes witty, as well as factual, clear, and comprehensible (with a few exceptions, some of them deliberate)' (Hanks 2005: 243), although he admitted the difficulty of defining some words, particularly the simplest ones: 'to interpret a language by itself is very difficult... simple ideas cannot be described' (*Preface*).

Johnson illustrated most meanings by quotations, that were assembled via a systematic reading of all the great—particularly literary—works written in English between 1586, the year of the death of Sir Philip Sidney, and 1660, the Restoration. He eventually used later writers, so that he had 'the usage of writers from the golden age of Elizabeth to the best usage of his own day' (Brewer 2000: 40). He was, according to all observers of the time, a prodigious reader. He selected about 250,000 passages, about half of which he eventually used, yielding about 110,000 illustrative passages (Hitchings 2005: 70) of varying lengths from about 500 authors (Hitchings 2005: 97), including himself, quoted thirty-three times, he

⁴⁶ The figures are from Hitchings (2005: 247). ⁴⁷ Probably the 1743 edition.

⁴⁸ Johnson may have used Chambers' *Preface* as a model for his own (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 19 *ff.*). Sledd and Kolb suggest that he also owned one of the later editions.

⁴⁹ On Johnson's work habits as a lexicographer, see Reddick (1990).

reckoned, but this may be an underestimate (Hitchings 2005: 99).⁵⁰ He cited only the authors he liked, and refused to quote from ‘any wicked writer’s authority for a word, lest it should send people to look in a book that might injure them for ever’ (*Preface*). He did not cite, for example, Samuel Richardson who was only a novelist (Hitchings 2005: 102), or the philosopher Thomas Hobbes because he ‘did not like his principles’ (Mugglestone 2005: 70). He arranged his quotations in chronological order when there was more than one in an entry, to reflect the evolution—Johnson said ‘progress’—of meaning (Kolb and Kolb 1972: 61–72; Reddick 1990: 97). Noah Webster, commenting on Johnson’s *Dictionary* later, thought that too much space had been devoted to quotations, particularly for the illustration of common words, but they were what made it so entertainingly readable. Johnson was not the first lexicographer to illustrate meanings with quotations, but he was certainly more systematic than any of his predecessors. The use of quotations ‘was one of the features that most distinguished’ his dictionary (Landau 2005: 219).

Johnson used quotations for attestation, to ‘prove the bare existence of words’ (*Preface*), ‘to illustrate the meaning of words in context, to establish that a word had been used by a reputable authority, to display how words were used by the best authors, to show the language as it was at an earlier era before it was contaminated by foreign influences, and to impart useful lessons and moral instruction’ (Morton 1989: 154–5; see also Reddick 1990: 9). ‘It is not enough that a dictionary delights the critic,’ Johnson wrote in the *Preface*, ‘unless at the same time it instructs the learner’. He wanted his dictionary to be an ‘arbiter of standards’ (Hitchings 2005: 68) and his quotations to ‘give pleasure or instruction, by conveying some elegance of language, or some precept of prudence, or piety’ (*Plan*).

Johnson’s treatment of polysemy was another of his achievements, some say his greatest (Sledd and Kolb 1955: 193). He accounted for subtle nuances of meaning with a precision that was unknown in English lexicography, announcing the *OED*: *world* had sixteen meanings, *take* 134, *set* about 90, etc. Sometimes he had to acknowledge defeat: ‘kindred sense may be so interwoven, that the perplexity cannot be disentangled’ (*Preface*). The different meanings were ordered ‘logically’, perhaps after Martin’s dictionary of 1749.

Of course, Johnson’s *Dictionary* had its weaknesses. Its etymologies were often faulty, its definitions sometimes obscure, its choice of words debatable, its indication of pronunciation sketchy (Congleton and Congleton 1984). It had

⁵⁰ He had a few quotations from other living authors. And he did have a few quotations from earlier authors, for example Chaucer (Hitchings 2005: 97).