

"The Life of Samuel Johnson" (1791) by James Boswell: A Canonical Book

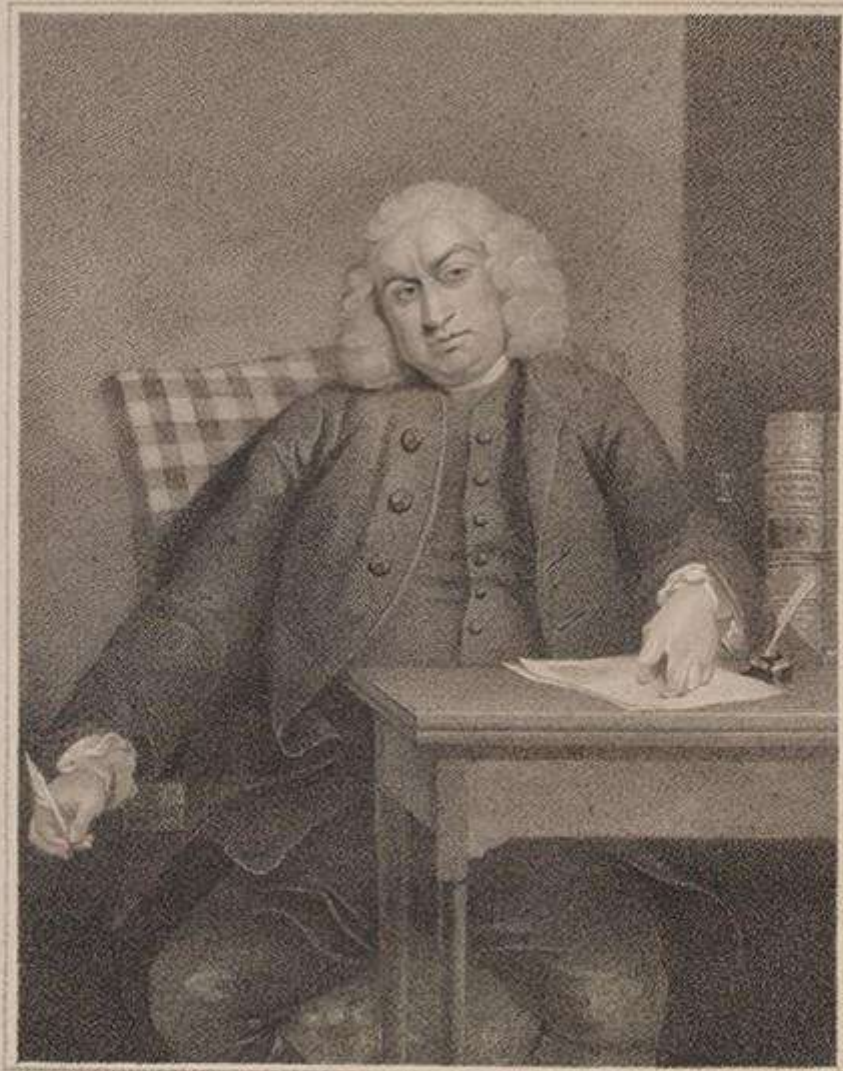
First edition curated by Stephen A Batman

Essay created Tuesday, April 01, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Comprehending an Account of His Studies and Numerous Works..., 1791





See Joshua Reynolds pinxit 1784

J. Heath sculp.

SAMUEL JOHNSON.

*From the original Picture
in the Possession of James Boswell Esq.*

THE
L I F E
OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

COMPREHENDING
AN ACCOUNT OF HIS STUDIES
AND NUMEROUS WORKS,
IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER;
A SERIES OF HIS EPISTOLARY CORRESPONDENCE
AND CONVERSATIONS WITH MANY EMINENT PERSONS;
AND
VARIOUS ORIGINAL PIECES OF HIS COMPOSITION,
NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED.
THE WHOLE EXHIBITING A VIEW OF LITERATURE AND LITERARY MEN
IN GREAT-BRITAIN, FOR NEAR HALF A CENTURY,
DURING WHICH HE FLOURISHED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

By JAMES BOSWELL, Esq.

— *Quò fit ut omnis*
Fatiga patens voluti descripta tabella
VITA SENIS. —

HORAT.

VOLUME THE FIRST.

L O N D O N:
PRINTED BY HENRY BALDWIN,
FOR CHARLES DILLY, IN THE POULTRY.
MDCXCXI.

“THAT DIALOGUE OF MIND, HEART AND VOICE”: FIRST EDITION OF BOSWELL’S *LIFE OF JOHNSON*, 1791, HANDSOMELY BOUND

First edition of "the most famous biography in any language, one of Western literature's most germinal achievements," handsomely bound.

"The Shakespeare of biographers" (Macaulay), James Boswell "excelled in insight into human nature and in ability to dramatize a situation. For such purposes [Dr. Samuel] Johnson was God's plenty... Boswell was not merely a conscientious preserver of detail; he was also an inspired shaping artist. He knew, and transmits, the sound of his subject's voice to a degree unparalleled in other biographers... Completeness of portrayal was certainly Boswell's aim—and his accomplishment" (Baugh et al., 1065-66).

"If there had been no Boswell, Johnson would have been one of the most famous names in English literature; but that he has become a household name... is due to the chance that brought Boswell into his company... Boswell is the sniffing bloodhound who will follow the scent of individuality into whatever territory it leads him. The fascination of their dialogue, that dialogue of mind, heart and voice round which Boswell organized his great *Life*, is that it is not merely between two very different men but between two epochs. In its pages, Romantic Europe speaks to Renaissance Europe, and is answered" (Wain, 229).

"Sales exceeded all expectations. Of a total of 1750 sets printed, 800 were sold in the first two weeks, 1200 by the end of August, 1400 by December, and 1600 by August 1792... Boswell's *Life of Johnson* remains the most famous biography in any language, one of Western literature's most germinal achievements..." (DNB). Volume I is *second state*, with "gve" corrected to "give" on page 135, line 10 (a change made before publication). Cancells present at Volume I, leaves [2M4]-2N1 (pages 271-74); Volume II, [E3] (pages 29-30), [2O4] (pages 287-88), [2Q3] (pages 301-02), 2Z1 (pages 353-54) and 3E2 (pages 395-96). Vol. II without blank A1, as often.

BOSWELL, James. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Comprehending an Account of His Studies and Numerous Works...* London: Printed by Henry Baldwin, for Charles Dilly, 1791. Two volumes. Quarto, modern full speckled brown calf, raised bands, elaborately gilt-decorated spines, rust and brown Morocco spine labels, marbled endpapers. Housed in a custom clamshell box.

With engraved frontispiece portrait of Johnson by James Heath after Sir Joshua Reynolds in Volume I and two engraved plates in Volume II. Rothschild 463. *Grolier 100*. Bookplates.

A handsome copy in fine condition.

Introduction

"The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D." by James Boswell, published in 1791, stands as a landmark in the development of the modern biographical genre. The first edition appeared on May 16, 1791, in two quarto volumes, with 1,750 copies printed[1]. This work emerged from

Boswell's meticulous documentation of his interactions with the renowned English writer and literary critic Samuel Johnson over their 21-year friendship. Boswell, having first met Johnson in 1763 at the age of 22 in the bookshop of Johnson's friend Tom Davies, maintained detailed journals of their conversations and experiences together[1][11].

The cultural climate surrounding the publication was one of intellectual ferment in Britain, with Johnson himself having been a central figure in London's literary scene. As the creator of the first modern dictionary of the English language and author of works like "Rasselas," Johnson had established himself as one of the most influential literary figures of the 18th century[5]. The publication of Boswell's biography came at a time when the concept of celebrity was evolving, as evidenced by Boswell's determination to provide the public with comprehensive information about Johnson's life and character[10].

Boswell's motivation for writing this biography stemmed from his profound admiration for Johnson and his desire to preserve Johnson's wisdom and character for posterity. Despite being criticized for his own personal shortcomings, Boswell was driven by what Thomas Carlyle described as "the celestial spark of goodness, of light, and Reverence for Wisdom" that allowed him to overcome his limitations in pursuit of this literary achievement[2]. The biography was preceded by Boswell's "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides" (1786), which served as a trial of his biographical method before undertaking the more ambitious "Life of Johnson"[1].

The Author

James Boswell was born on October 29, 1740, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to a family of some prominence[9]. He studied law in Utrecht from 1763 to 1764, following which he embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe that included visits to numerous German courts, meetings with philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, and travels through many Italian cities[9]. His adventurous spirit led him to the island of Corsica, where he befriended rebel leader Pasquale Paoli, an experience that formed the basis of his first successful publication, "An Account of Corsica" (1768)[9].

Boswell completed his legal education in 1766 with a dissertation titled "Disputatio juridica de supellectile legata quam publicae disquisitioni," though some of the Latin used in this work was later criticized by Dr. Johnson himself[9]. On November 25, 1769, Boswell married his first cousin, Margaret Montgomerie, daughter of his father's sister[9]. Upon his father Alexander Boswell's death in 1782, James inherited Auchinleck House and became the 9th Laird of Auchinleck[9].

Despite his legal training and aristocratic background, Boswell is primarily remembered for his literary achievements. He was a brilliant conversationalist who helped found the Literary Club (1764), which became famous for its distinguished members, including David Garrick and Edmund Burke[4]. Beyond his biography of Johnson, Boswell was recognized as an exceptional

diarist. His journals, published in the 20th century, filled eighteen volumes and revealed his meticulous documentation of daily experiences[1][4].

Boswell's character was complex and often contradictory. Thomas Carlyle noted that he was "vain, heedless, a babbler" yet possessed a "celestial spark of goodness" that enabled him to produce his masterpiece[2]. This duality in Boswell's nature—his personal flaws contrasted with his literary genius—has fascinated scholars and readers alike. He died on May 19, 1795, in London, following weeks of serious illness, leaving behind a literary legacy that would far outshine his reputation as a lawyer or Scottish laird[4][9].

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Life of Samuel Johnson" must be included in the canon of significant books for several compelling reasons. First, it revolutionized the biographical genre, establishing a new standard for depth, authenticity, and narrative engagement. From its publication, it has been "regarded as the greatest of English biographies, written by James Boswell and published in two volumes in 1791"[11]. This innovative approach to biography has influenced countless writers and thinkers in the centuries since its publication.

The work provides invaluable insights into 18th-century British intellectual life, capturing the vibrant conversations and debates that shaped the Enlightenment era. Through Johnson's discussions with his contemporaries, readers gain access to perspectives on politics, religion, morality, and literature that continue to inform our understanding of Western intellectual traditions. These traditions, particularly those concerning individual liberty, reasoned discourse, and moral philosophy, have profoundly influenced American political and cultural thought.

Boswell's biography also exemplifies the value of meticulous observation and documentation—qualities essential to both scholarship and journalism. His approach to recording Johnson's conversations, using "a self-invented system of shorthand," demonstrates a commitment to accuracy and detail that resonates with American ideals of truth-seeking and empirical evidence[11]. This methodical approach to capturing reality has parallels in American traditions of documentary journalism and historical scholarship.

Furthermore, the relationship between Boswell and Johnson—crossing boundaries of age, nationality, and temperament—reflects the American ideal of judging individuals by their character and contributions rather than by arbitrary social distinctions. Their friendship, sustained through intellectual exchange and mutual respect despite their differences, embodies values central to American conceptions of civic friendship and democratic discourse.

Finally, the biography's enduring popularity and influence demonstrate the power of accessible, engaging writing to shape cultural understanding. By presenting Johnson's complex ideas in the context of vivid personal interactions, Boswell made philosophical and literary concepts accessible to a broad audience—a democratization of knowledge that aligns with American

educational ideals. The work's canonical status is confirmed by Thomas Macaulay's assessment: "Boswell is the first of biographers. He has no second. He has distanced all his competitors so decidedly that it is not worth while to place them"[8].

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time."[6]

This profound observation by Johnson, preserved by Boswell, speaks to the enduring human preoccupation with mortality and meaning. In our current era of social media and instant gratification, this quote reminds us to focus on the substance of our lives rather than superficial appearances or momentary experiences. It challenges us to consider how we use our time and talents in service of lasting values rather than fleeting pleasures or recognition. For civic-minded Americans, it emphasizes that one's legacy is built through consistent character and contribution, not through dramatic gestures or final moments.

2. "He had no settled plan of life, nor looked forward at all, but merely lived from day to day. Yet he read a great deal in a desultory manner, without any scheme of study, as chance threw books in his way, and inclination directed him through them."[6]

This description of Johnson's early habits resonates powerfully in our information-saturated age. It acknowledges the value of intellectual curiosity and organic learning, even without rigid structure. For contemporary readers navigating overwhelming amounts of information, it suggests that meaningful knowledge can emerge from following one's interests authentically. This perspective offers a counterbalance to hyper-specialized education and career paths, suggesting that breadth of reading and intellectual flexibility remain valuable in developing a well-rounded mind capable of addressing complex societal challenges.

3. "Sir, I have found you an argument; but I am not obliged to find you an understanding."[6]

This witty retort captures Johnson's intellectual rigor and refusal to suffer fools gladly. In our current political climate, where reasoned debate often gives way to entrenched positions and confirmation bias, this quote reminds us that presenting logical arguments is only half the equation—the recipient must possess the willingness and capacity to engage with them honestly. It challenges Americans to develop their critical thinking skills and to approach disagreements with intellectual humility, recognizing that understanding requires effort from both sides of any debate.

4. "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."[6]

This provocative statement reflects Johnson's practical approach to literary work and his recognition that economic realities shape intellectual production. For contemporary Americans navigating changing economic landscapes and the "gig economy," it raises important questions about the valuation of creative and intellectual labor. It challenges idealistic notions that separate art from commerce while acknowledging the practical necessities that drive human endeavor. This tension between creative passion and economic pragmatism remains central to American cultural and economic debates.

5. "The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing."[6]

In our era of "fake news" and information manipulation, Johnson's insistence on truth as the foundation of meaningful narrative could not be more relevant. This quote speaks to the ethical responsibility of writers, journalists, and citizens to pursue and communicate truth, even when uncomfortable or inconvenient. It reminds Americans that authentic understanding of ourselves and our society depends on honest representation of reality, not comforting fictions. This commitment to truth-telling is essential to maintaining the integrity of public discourse in a democratic society.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Art of Biography as Truth-Telling

Boswell revolutionized biography by combining meticulous documentation with narrative artistry. Unlike previous biographers who often idealized their subjects, Boswell presented Johnson with all his contradictions and flaws intact. As Boswell himself noted, "The value of every story depends on its being true"[6]. This commitment to truthful portrayal, even when it revealed Johnson's eccentricities or prejudices, established a new standard for biographical writing. Boswell's approach demonstrated that authentic representation, rather than hagiography, creates the most compelling and valuable portrait of a life. This idea continues to influence how we understand the relationship between truth and narrative in both literature and journalism.

2. The Power of Conversation as Intellectual Exchange

The biography celebrates conversation as a primary vehicle for intellectual development and human connection. Johnson's "forceful, witty" talk forms the core of the book, with Boswell often deliberately asking questions "that appeared naive or ignorant in order to prompt his subject to make statements worth preserving"[11]. This elevation of dialogue—spontaneous yet profound—suggests that knowledge emerges not just from solitary study but from the dynamic exchange of ideas between minds. In our digital age, when face-to-face conversation is increasingly replaced by mediated communication, Boswell's work reminds us of the irreplaceable value of direct, responsive intellectual exchange.

3. The Complex Relationship Between Character and Achievement

Through his detailed portrayal of Johnson, Boswell explores how personal virtues and flaws intertwine in the creation of a significant life. Johnson emerges as brilliant yet troubled, generous yet sometimes harsh, deeply religious yet plagued by fears. Boswell notes that "Everything about his character and manners was forcible and violent; there never was any moderation"[6]. This nuanced portrayal suggests that greatness does not require perfection and that understanding a person's achievements requires acknowledging their full humanity. This perspective offers a more sophisticated alternative to both uncritical hero-worship and reductive character assassination in our assessment of public figures.

4. The Value of Friendship Across Differences

The biography itself stands as a testament to the possibility of meaningful friendship between individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and temperaments. Despite their many differences—Johnson was 53 when they met, Boswell only 22; Johnson was English, Boswell Scottish; Johnson was established, Boswell aspiring—they formed a deep and lasting bond based on mutual respect and intellectual affinity[11]. This relationship demonstrates how differences can enrich rather than impede human connection when approached with genuine curiosity and respect. In our increasingly polarized society, this model of friendship across divides offers a powerful alternative to tribalism and ideological isolation.

5. The Democratization of Knowledge and Culture

By recording Johnson's conversations and making them accessible to a wide audience, Boswell participated in the democratization of knowledge that characterized the Enlightenment. Johnson's thoughts on literature, morality, politics, and daily life—previously available only to those in his immediate circle—became accessible to anyone who could read the biography. This democratizing impulse aligns with fundamental American values regarding the importance of widespread access to knowledge and culture. Boswell's work suggests that wisdom need not be confined to academic treatises but can emerge from and be communicated through ordinary human interaction, making it accessible to a broader public.

Three Major Controversies

1. Biographical Method and Authorial Presence

Boswell's approach to biography, while revolutionary, generated significant controversy regarding the appropriate role of the biographer. Critics like Thomas Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle engaged in heated debate about whether Boswell's prominent presence in the narrative enhanced or detracted from the portrayal of Johnson[2]. Macaulay suggested that Boswell's personal shortcomings paradoxically enabled his success as a biographer, while Carlyle argued that Boswell succeeded not because of but despite his flaws, representing "a victory in the war

between the base and the divine in our souls"[2]. This controversy extends to broader questions about objectivity versus subjectivity in non-fiction writing and the extent to which an author's personality should be visible in their work. The debate continues to influence discussions about memoir, journalism, and documentary filmmaking in American cultural discourse.

2. Representation of Race and Marginalized Figures

The treatment of Francis Barber, Johnson's Black manservant from Jamaica who became his heir, reveals competing attitudes toward race in 18th-century Britain that resonate with American struggles over racial representation and justice. As Michael Bundock notes, rival biographers John Hawkins and James Boswell offered starkly different portrayals of Barber and his relationship with Johnson[3]. Hawkins' biography displayed "open hostility to Barber" with criticism of Johnson's support for Barber that was "tinged with racism," while Boswell's more favorable characterization of Barber and his interracial marriage represented "a response and rebuke to Hawkins"[3]. This controversy illuminates the long history of contested racial attitudes in Anglo-American culture and the role of literature in either reinforcing or challenging racial prejudice.

3. Editorial Integrity and Textual Authority

The publication history of "The Life of Samuel Johnson" sparked controversy over editorial practices and textual authority. John Wilson Croker's 1831 edition was "swiftly condemned in reviews by Thomas Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle" for its editorial weaknesses and, more significantly, for "interpolat[ing] into his Boswell text from the contemporaneous rival biographies of Johnson"[1]. This practice of combining texts without clear attribution violated emerging standards of scholarly integrity. The controversy speaks to ongoing tensions between accessibility and accuracy in the presentation of historical texts and the ethical responsibilities of editors and publishers. These issues remain relevant in contemporary debates about digital archives, scholarly editions, and the preservation of cultural heritage in American institutions.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Life of Samuel Johnson" for its enduring lessons about intellectual integrity, meaningful dialogue, and the complex relationship between individual character and public contribution. In an era of polarized discourse and simplified narratives, Boswell's nuanced portrayal of Johnson offers a model of biographical writing that acknowledges human complexity without surrendering to moral relativism. Johnson emerges as neither saint nor villain but as a fully realized human being whose strengths and weaknesses are inextricably connected.

The biography demonstrates the power of conversation as a vehicle for intellectual exchange and mutual understanding. As Johnson and his contemporaries debate religion, politics, literature, and morality, readers witness the Enlightenment values of reasoned discourse and respectful

disagreement that underpin American democratic traditions. In our current climate of ideological echo chambers and algorithmic reinforcement of existing beliefs, Boswell's record of Johnson's wide-ranging conversations reminds us that genuine intellectual growth requires engagement with diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the work illustrates how friendship can transcend differences of age, background, and temperament when founded on mutual respect and shared intellectual curiosity. The relationship between Boswell and Johnson—spanning 21 years despite their many differences—offers a powerful counterexample to the tribalism that threatens American civic life. Their friendship suggests that meaningful human connection is possible across divides when approached with genuine interest in understanding rather than merely persuading or defeating the other.

Finally, Boswell's meticulous documentation of Johnson's life and thought demonstrates the value of preserving cultural heritage for future generations. His recognition that Johnson's conversations contained wisdom worth recording for posterity reflects a commitment to cultural transmission that remains essential to maintaining the continuity of civic values and intellectual traditions. For Americans concerned with preserving and renewing their democratic culture, Boswell's work offers both inspiration and practical example of how individual efforts to document and interpret the present become invaluable resources for the future.

In sum, "The Life of Samuel Johnson" is not merely a historical artifact but a living text that continues to offer insights into human nature, intellectual exchange, and the art of biography itself. Its canonical status is well-deserved, not only for its literary merits but for its enduring relevance to fundamental questions of how we understand ourselves and others, how we engage in meaningful dialogue across differences, and how we preserve and transmit cultural wisdom across generations.

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