

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Samuel Johnson*

Samuel Johnson is a towering figure of eighteenth-century literature, ‘arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history’ (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*). As well as the celebrated author of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson was the leading literary critic of his time, and a writer who contributed to almost every genre from poetry to political pamphleteering. At the same time, an enduring legend developed around him, culminating in James Boswell’s classic biography. This book offers a concise introduction to Johnson’s many-sided work, as well as explaining its historical context. Presenting Johnson in his different guises – journalist, poet and storyteller, scholar, critic, political and social thinker, biographer and legend – it guides the reader through Johnson’s writings, including detailed treatments of his major texts.

Robert DeMaria, Jr has devoted most of his professional life to the study of Samuel Johnson. He is the author of three monographs on Johnson and the co-editor of three volumes as well as the general editor of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 23 vols. (1958–2018).

Dan Hitchens is a writer, journalist, and senior editor of *First Things*.

The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Johnson

ROBERT DEMARIA, JR

Vassar College

DAN HITCHENS



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*To
Joanne DeMaria
and
Peter and Eve Hitchens*

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Robert DeMaria writes: I would like to thank Joanne DeMaria, my partner in life and love for fifty years.

Dan Hitchens writes: Johnson referred to ‘that love of life which is necessary to the vigorous prosecution of any undertaking’. So thank you to Amy and Conal, without whom this book might never have been finished. It would never have got started without my doctoral supervisor Freya Johnston, an encourager and mentor to so many students, who very characteristically suggested this project in the first place. And thanks above all to my first and greatest teachers, my parents, to whom this book is dedicated.

Chronology

Dates are Old Style (O.S.) until 1752, unless otherwise noted. Years, however, are all in New Style (N.S., i.e. beginning on 1 January). See the timelines of Pat Rogers, *The Samuel Johnson Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) and Jack Lynch (ed.), *Samuel Johnson in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) for further details.

- 1709 (7 September O.S.; 18 September N.S.) Samuel Johnson born in Lichfield to Michael and Sarah Johnson. Richard Steele begins publication of the *Tatler* (12 April). Alexander Pope begins his publishing career.
- 1712 Johnson touched for the ‘King’s Evil’ (scrofula) in London by Queen Anne.
- 1714 Death of Queen Anne; George, Elector of Hanover, becomes George I of Great Britain (1 August).
- 1717 Enters Lichfield Grammar School.
- 1720 ‘South-Sea Bubble’, a massive stock collapse.
- 1721 Robert Walpole becomes de facto prime minister.
- 1725 Extended stay in the household of his cousin Cornelius Ford in Stourbridge.
- 1726 *Gulliver’s Travels* published.
- 1727–8 Self-directed reading at home in Lichfield; George I dies; George II is king (11 June 1727).
- 1728 Enters Pembroke College, Oxford, where he remains for thirteen months.
- 1729 Returns to Lichfield; fails to secure a teaching post.
- 1731 Death of Johnson’s father, Michael Johnson, leaving scant provision for his survivors.

- 1732 Works for a few months as an usher (teaching assistant) at Market Bosworth School.
- 1732–3 Writing for the *Birmingham Journal*.
- 1735 Marries Elizabeth Jervis Porter, a widow twenty years his senior with three children; publishes *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, a translation of a Jesuit missionary's account.
- 1736 Starts his school at Edial; writes some portion of *Irene*.
- 1737 Johnson and Garrick go to London (2 March); only brother Nathaniel dies.
- 1738 Publishes *London*; writes the life of Paulo Sarpi, part of his abandoned translation of Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent*.
- 1739 *Marmor Norfolciense; A Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage*.
- 1740 Lives of Blake, Drake, and Barretier; 'Essay on Epitaphs'; epitaph on Claudy Philips; prologue to Garrick's *Lethe*.
- 1741–3 *Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia*.
- 1742 Life of Sydenham; resignation of Walpole.
- 1743 Catalogue of the Harleian Library; 'The Young Author' published; Richard Savage dies in debtors' prison; Henry Pelham becomes prime minister.
- 1744 *The Life of Richard Savage*; death of Pope (30 May).
- 1745 *Miscellaneous Observations on Macbeth*; death of Walpole; death of Swift (19 October).
- 1746 Signs contract to write *A Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1747 *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language; Drury-Lane Prologue* (15 September).
- 1748 Contributions to Robert Dodsley's educational text, *The Preceptor*.
- 1749 *The Vanity of Human Wishes; Irene*; William Lauder's essay on Milton; moves into the house in Gough Square.
- 1750–2 *The Rambler* (20 March 1750–14 March 1752)
- 1750 Francis Barber brought to England by his enslaver Richard Bathurst.
- 1751 *Life of Cheynel*.

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- 1752 Death of Elizabeth Porter Johnson (17 March); Johnson writes dedication for Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote*; Anna Williams takes up residence in Johnson's house. *The Adventurer* begins (7 November).
- 1753 Francis Barber comes to Johnson's household.
- 1753–4 Writes for John Hawkesworth's *Adventurer*.
- 1754 Life of Edward Cave, the proprietor and founder of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Languages*; awarded MA by Oxford University.
- 1756 Edits Sir Thomas Browne's *Christian Morals* with a life of Browne.
- 1756–7 Contributions to *The Literary Magazine*; the life of Frederick the Great; Johnson meets Reynolds; Seven Years' War begins.
- 1757 Review of Soame Jenyns; John Wilkes elected to Parliament.
- 1758–60 *The Idler* (15 April 1758–5 April 1760).
- 1758 Briefly under arrest for debt; relieved by Samuel Richardson.
- 1759 *Rasselas*; mother dies in Lichfield (23 January); moves from Gough Square; Battle of Quebec.
- 1760 'Bravery of English Common Soldiers'; moves to 1 Inner Temple Lane; death of George II; George III is king (25 October).
- 1761 Edits Roger Ascham's *English Works*, with a life of Ascham; death of Samuel Richardson.
- 1762 Awarded an annual pension of £300 by George III.
- 1763 Meets James Boswell (16 May); Peace of Paris ending Seven Years' War.
- 1764 Forms The Club with Joshua Reynolds.
- 1765 Meets Hester and Henry Thrale (9 January); *The Plays of William Shakespeare*; awarded LLD degree by Trinity College Dublin; moves to a house in Johnson's Court; Wilkesite riot in St George's Fields, Southwark.
- 1766 Assists Robert Chambers on the Second Vinerian Law Lectures.
- 1767 Private meeting with King George III.
- 1768 Royal Academy founded.

- 1769 Garrick organizes the Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford; Reynolds delivers his first *Discourse* at the Royal Academy; Captain Cook arrives in Tahiti.
- 1770 *The False Alarm*; birth of William Wordsworth.
- 1771 *Thoughts on Falkland's Islands*.
- 1772 Lord Mansfield's decision in *Somerset v Stewart*, an important step in the abolition of slavery.
- 1773 Tours Scotland with Boswell; revised editions of the *Dictionary* and the *Plays of William Shakespeare*.
- 1774 *The Patriot*; tour of North Wales with Thrales; Donaldson v Becket establishes that copyright is not perpetual.
- 1775 *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*; visits France with Thrales and Baretti; birth of Jane Austen. LLD from Oxford University; Battle of Lexington and Concord.
- 1776 Johnson moves to his final dwelling place, No. 8, Bolt Court; Declaration of Independence in America.
- 1777 *The Convict's Address* and other writings for William Dodd.
- 1779 Death of Garrick.
- 1780 Gordon Riots in London.
- 1779–81 *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical to the Works of the English Poets*.
- 1781 *The Lives of the Poets* published independently.
- 1783 Suffers stroke (17 June).
- 1784 Hester Thrale marries Gabriel Piozzi (23 July); Johnson dies on 13 December.
- 1785 Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides; Poetical Works*, ed. George Kearsley.
- 1786 Thrale-Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*.
- 1787 *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John Hawkins; Volume I is his *Life of Johnson*.
- 1791 Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*

Abbreviations

<i>Bibliography</i>	J. D. Fleeman, <i>A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating His Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984</i> , 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000)
<i>Journey</i>	Samuel Johnson, <i>A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland</i> , ed. J. D. Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)
<i>LAEP</i>	<i>The Complete Poems of Samuel Johnson</i> , ed. Robert D. Brown and Robert DeMaria, Jr, Longman’s Annotated English Poets series (London: Routledge, 2024)
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Johnson</i> , ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992–4)
<i>Life</i>	James Boswell, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> , ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–64)
<i>Lives</i>	Samuel Johnson, <i>The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works</i> , ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2006)
<i>Miscellanies</i>	G. B. Hill, ed., <i>Johnsonian Miscellanies</i> , 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897)
<i>Works</i>	Robert DeMaria, Jr, Allen T. Hazen, John H. Middendorf, et al., <i>The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson</i> , 23 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958–2019)

Biblical citations are from the King James Version. *Dictionary* quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from the 1755 edition.