

Samuel Johnson and his Dictionary

Born in Lichfield in September 1709 to a comparatively humble family (his father was a bookseller, although his mother came from “respected gentry stock”) Samuel Johnson was a very sick child, something that stayed with him throughout his life; he once said that “there was scarcely a day in which he felt completely well” (Woodman, 1993, p10). Despite ill health he was to become one of the most important and respected individuals in English literature. He was also prone to bouts of depression and periods when he lacked any motivation. Indeed his diaries contain lists of things for him to do to try and improve his lot – such as reminding himself to get up before nine o'clock so that he might get some work done.

During his time at Lichfield Grammar School he was a successful pupil, and he spent much of his free time reading books in his father’s bookshop. After leaving school Johnson’s academic ability seemed to be going to waste as he spent time working (although mainly reading) in the bookshop, but at the age of nineteen his mother inherited a small amount of money which enabled him to go up to Oxford. However, the money did not last long, and a mere thirteen months after going up he was forced to return to Lichfield.

After another period of depression as a result of this academic setback, Johnson was appointed as a grammar school teacher in Market Bosworth. This pursuit was also doomed to fail because of his eccentricities and a domineering patron of the school. In 1735 he married and with money that his wife brought, he set up a school at Edial Hall (near Lichfield). This too failed, and when the money ran out Johnson felt his only chance of success was to visit London with his friend David Garrick in search of new employment.

His first job in London was writing for the *Gentleman’s Magazine* which he did for many years although the essays were always published anonymously. His first eleven years in London were a period of

obscurity, as it was not until 1749 that his name appeared on the title page of his work. Even then he did not become recognised until his essays for *The Rambler* (1750-2) gained popularity, and the publication of the *Dictionary* (1755).

His work on the dictionary began in 1746, while still very much unknown, when he signed the contract with a group of London booksellers (one of which was a Mr Longman). He received 1500 guineas (approximately £160,000 in today's terms) for what was intended to be three years work, but ultimately took nine. Although there were nine years between the signing and publication, Johnson did delay publication, as he wanted an honorary degree from Oxford (to help the dictionary sell) before the title page was printed. The majority of the money was taken up with paying scribes, but it was nevertheless his first worthwhile gain from literature. Even though there was very little left at the completion of the *Dictionary* he had carved a reputation on which he would be able to make money in future. During the rest of his life he wrote essays on many moral subjects, revised the dictionary (running to four editions), and published many other books. He died in December 1784 (aged 75) and was buried in Westminster Abbey. In a slightly strange move, he left all of his money to his black manservant who had been looking after him since his wife's death, he moved to Lichfield and stayed there for the rest of his life.

Johnson's *Dictionary* was by no means the first dictionary in English or any language (there had been bilingual word lists, and compendia of 'difficult' words), but it was the first work to satisfy the needs discussed by writers from the Restoration (1660) onwards. Initially the contemporary feeling was that an Academy should be founded – such as the Italian and French academies which appeared after 1635. Addison, Pope, Dryden, and Defoe were great supporters of this scheme, and Swift was the last advocate of the idea in 1712 when he described it as the best opportunity for “ascertaining and fixing our language for ever” (Woodman,1993, p134). They felt that by the end of the seventeenth century language had reached its apogee, and in future it could only deteriorate.

During the eighteenth century there was also an increased desire for accuracy in English grammar and spelling. Spelling was problematic as it was dependent on pronunciation - in turn dependent on class, education, and the speaker's dialect. At the time it was argued that parliament should pass a law making correct spelling obligatory. An earlier dictionary by Bailey in 1736 was an attempt to provide a reference point, but the dividing line between it and an Encyclopaedia was blurred with the dictionary defining many proper names such as mythological characters. Johnson's *Dictionary* was the logical progression to provide the required accuracy, but he was very aware that any rules he would lay down could not control the natural development of language and that a dictionary could only ever reflect the way language was used at that time.

In Bailey's dictionary the definitions are sometimes flawed as they assume prior knowledge: for example a "mouse" is defined as "an animal well known". At the other end of the spectrum Johnson has been criticised for the very accurate, but overwhelming, definitions of a "network" as "any thing reticulated, or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections", or a "cough" as "a convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity". While these are humorous examples, his thoroughness cannot be overlooked: the definition of "make" gives sixty uses, and twenty are provided for the word "up".

The biggest innovation in the *Dictionary* was Johnson's inclusion of quotations from literary, historical, theological and scientific sources to give an example of the usage of each definition – today this is only found in the twenty-plus volume OED. The quotations give the modern reader an insight into English culture from Shakespearean to Johnsonian times (with the occasional inclusion of a Chaucerian quotation). The choice of quotation and wording of definition also provides an insight into Johnson's own beliefs and morality – he defines a "Whig" as "a faction...", but a "Tory" as "one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state and the apostolical hierarchy of the Church of England".

As part of the contemporary search for accuracy and stability, Johnson was well aware that his dictionary could only ever achieve half of it. In his original plan for the dictionary he wrote “language is the work of man, a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived”. Although he was well aware that the European concept of an Academy to protect the language was impossible, Johnson does seem to be saddened by the inevitability of change in the language. In some respects the very fact that he has recorded the words with substantial quotations suggests an attempt to stem the evolution of the language.

Without a doubt, Johnson’s dictionary was superior in content to everything that had preceded it, and it was the foundation of dictionaries for the next hundred years (the OED was not completed until 1927, having been started in 1896). The work itself is amazing in that he was single-handedly able to find and define every word in daily usage from just 150 years of literature. The *Dictionary* was widely recognised in Europe, and Voltaire proposed a French dictionary to be modelled on Johnson’s. In 1757, two years after the publication of the first edition, the author of an English-Dutch dictionary (The Reverend Dean Jacob Serenius) wrote from Sweden:

“Nothing will be perfect, much less a Dictionary. But if anything comes near perfection it is that of your Johnson’s work. I am astonished at that gentleman’s labour which is enough for two men’s life.” (Clifford, 1979, p148)

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