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Portrait of Samuel Johnson by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1756-57)

DEFINING THE WORLD: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF DR JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY

by Henry Hitchings

■ Two Book Reviews ■

Amazingly enough, the first great dictionary was basically the work of one man.

Jonathan Yardley

The English language, like any other, is intrinsically mutable, subject to constant growth and change, some for better, some for worse, but all of it inescapable. Still, in this ever-shifting linguistic universe there are constants. Meanings and usages may evolve and alter, but their root definitions and their proper spellings are known quantities. How are they known? They are known because we can look them up in dictionaries, which provide the reliable foundation to which we can always return for information about how words are used, how they should be used, how they are spelled.

We take this for granted. Except on those rare occasions when new editions of existing dictionaries are issued—the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster's*, their many imitators and spin-offs—we almost never think about dictionaries, never wonder how they are put together or who is responsible for them. The answer, of course, is that they are assembled and edited by very large committees, by lexicographers who labor in anonymity, credited in the finished product in long lists of contributors but otherwise unknown.

It is difficult to imagine how it could be otherwise, given the immense size of the language, yet the first important dictionary of the English language was essentially the work of one man. Published in 1755, the *Dictionary of the English Language* contained some 42,000 entries, with definitions, etymologies and illustrative quotations, all of it the work of Samuel Johnson. Yes, he had, as Henry Hitchings writes in *Defining the World*, "six amanuenses, who attended to some of [the] more menial and mechanical aspects," but the dictionary itself was Johnson's. The labor occupied fully a decade—Johnson at first thought he could finish it off in three years—and took over his life. After its completion he, and the language, were never again the same.

The dictionary was published in the middle of the most extraordinary century English literature has known—the time of the Enlightenment, of Henry Fielding and Alexander Pope and Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift and Samuel Richardson—and may well have been its most majestic and enduring achievement. As Hitchings writes:

> The authority of Johnson's work has coloured every dictionary of English that has since been compiled. In the second half of the eighteenth century, and for most of the nineteenth, it enjoyed totemic status in both Britain and America. When British speakers of English refer today to 'the dictionary,' they imply the *Oxford English Dictionary*, while Americans incline towards *Webster's*. But for 150 years 'the dictionary' meant Johnson's *Dictionary*. To quote Robert Burchfield, the editor of the supplement to the *OED*: 'In the whole tradition of English language and literature the *only* dictionary compiled by a writer of the first rank is that of Dr. Johnson.' Unlike other dictionaries, Johnson's is a work of literature.

That is no exaggeration. Not merely did Johnson draw upon an incredible variety of sources to locate and define words—"He selected illustrations from poetry, drama and novels, from the Bible and the literature of divinity, from lawyers and antiquarians, from historians and politicians, from philosophy and physics, from educational primers and medical works"—but he also wrote some of the most muscular, original prose the English language has known. Again to quote Hitchings:

> Johnson's finest definitions remind us that he was a poet. They are succinct, accurate and elegant. He is especially skilled in explaining some of those abstract or intangible things that seem least amenable to definition. 'Conscience' is 'the knowledge or faculty by which we judge of the goodness or wickedness of ourselves.' A 'trance' is 'a temporary absence of the soul.' An 'imp' is a 'puny devil.' A 'rant' consists of 'high-sounding language unsupported by dignity of thought.' Anything described as 'tawdry' is 'meanly showy; splendid without cost; fine without grace; showy without elegance.' An 'expletive' is 'something used only to take up room; something of which the use is only to prevent a vacancy.'

Johnson could be witty and sly: "An 'uxorious' man is 'infected with connubial dotage.' A 'coquette' is 'a girl who endeavours to attract notice'; a 'cynic' is 'a philosopher of the snarling or currish sort.' " He could be deft: "Johnson neatly defines 'to strut' as 'to walk with affected dignity' . . . A 'hope' is, among other things, 'an expectation indulged with pleasure.'" He could be vivid and playful: "A 'bedpresser' is 'a heavy lazy fellow'. . . A 'giglet' is 'a lascivious girl'; an 'abbey-lubber' is someone who loiters in religious places 'under pretense of retirement and austerity,' and 'prickhouse' is 'a word of contempt for a tailor.' A 'fopdoodle' is 'a fool; an insignificant wretch.' " Et cetera.

Dr Johnson's House,
17 Gough Square, London

Much in Johnson's dictionary is now obscure or outdated, but the dictionary can still be read with delight; when, about four decades ago, *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection* was published, reviewers and readers welcomed it as evidence that over more than two centuries Johnson's prose and wit had lost none of their power to inform and entertain. Though he is now known chiefly as the speaker of delicious and timeless aphorisms faithfully recorded by James Boswell in his monumental *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), he was chiefly a writer of the first rank: poet, dramatist, essayist, biographer and just about everything else.

In 1746, though, when he contracted to compile his dictionary, he was comparatively unknown, a resident of a place called "*grub-street*," subsequently defined by him as "originally the name of a street in Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called grubstreet." He was married, not especially happily, to a woman much his senior and lived a hand-to-mouth existence that seemed likely to stretch into eternity. Then Robert Dodsley, a formidable bookseller, persuaded him to undertake the dictionary and set him on the path to the éclat he enjoys today.

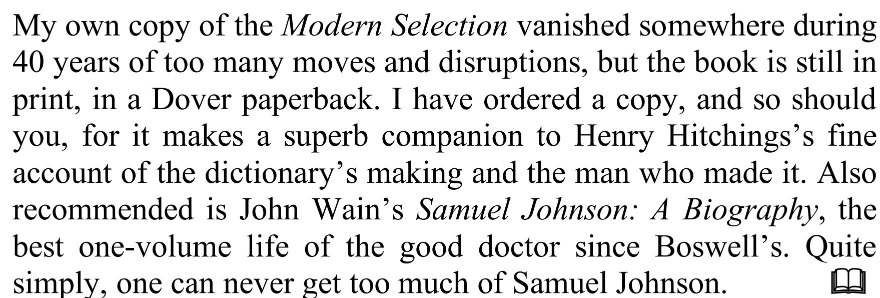
Johnson seems to have approached the task somewhat lightheartedly, but that didn't last long. He soon realized that "compiling the *Dictionary* would be not just intellectually exacting but a physical labour, too . . . there would be large books to be lugged; a multi-

tude of quotations would require painstaking transcription; quires of paper would have to be cut up into copy slips." Much of that labor was done by his assistants, but Johnson himself—often in shaky health—was at the center of it all, reading in prodigious amounts, recording words he encountered, placing everything in order, making sense of it all.

When finally published, the book was the proverbial doorstopper. "It was, in the first place, a large, cumbersome item, weighing around twenty pounds—the same as a very big Christmas turkey." Eventually it would be bound in four volumes, but it was "still unwieldy." It "is the sort of book that has to be rested on a table or a lectern; it is not easy to lift a volume one-handed, and only a basketball player would be able to hold it up and open with a single hand." The initial press run was 2,000 copies ("Today this seems a modest figure, but the market was not huge") and was "expensive to produce." It cost four pounds 10 shillings, a pittance now but a very large sum then, evidence that "for all Johnson's avowedly pedagogic aims, his market consisted at first of affluent, educated readers."

Despite its price, the dictionary was received enthusiastically and quickly began to work its way into the central place it has occupied ever after. It did have its critics—some objected that Johnson's sources were primarily literary rather than popular, while others pointed out his frequent (and inevitable) errors—but generally it was accepted as definitive, and Johnson was properly praised for the magnitude of his achievement. An abridged edition was published in 1756, making the dictionary cheaper and thus more widely available, and "the dictionary" took its place in the language.

My own copy of the *Modern Selection* vanished somewhere during 40 years of too many moves and disruptions, but the book is still in print, in a Dover paperback. I have ordered a copy, and so should you, for it makes a superb companion to Henry Hitchings's fine account of the dictionary's making and the man who made it. Also recommended is John Wain's *Samuel Johnson: A Biography*, the best one-volume life of the good doctor since Boswell's. Quite simply, one can never get too much of Samuel Johnson.



Jonathan Yardley is The Washington Post's book critic.

The Boundless Chaos of a Living Speech

Eric Ormsby

In a poignant little essay on sleep in *The Idler* of November 25, 1758, Samuel Johnson remarked that "in solitude we have our dreams to ourselves, and in company we agree to dream in concert. The end in both is forgetfulness of ourselves."

Johnson knew whereof he spoke: Almost all of his many literary ventures, from the colossal *A Dictionary of the English Language* to his pioneering biographies of poets and his sprightly and scintillating essays—not to mention his poems, prayers, journals, travel accounts, his novel or his sprawling Shakespearian commentaries—seem to have been prompted by a horror of the self and a passionate desire to achieve "the nectar of oblivion." This impossibly erudite, overbearing, tender, and anguished man lived in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with himself which only disciplined labor could allay but never completely still.

James Boswell with customary shrewdness noted this motive. In his biography, he stated that Johnson had to be "engaged in a steady continual course of occupation, sufficient to employ all his time for some years; and which was best preventive of that constitutional melancholy which was ever lurking about him, ready to trouble his quiet." For all his boisterous bonhomie and clubbable exuberance, Johnson knew that work, even the "drudge's" work of lexicography, was the only sure defense against his indwelling demons.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the publication of *A Dictionary of the English Language*. So pervasive has been the influence of this heroic work that it is hard, if not impossible, to imagine the world without it. When Johnson set about his lexicographical toils in 1747, no English dictionaries worthy of the name yet existed. Johnson himself was properly daunted. How even begin to broach what he rightly termed "the boundless chaos of a living speech"? And he went on to confess of his ambitious plan that "I am frightened at its extent, and, like the soldiers of Caesar, look on Britain as a new world, which it is almost madness to invade."

Natasha McEnroe, curator of the museum at Dr Samuel Johnson's house, holds up the revolutionary dictionary written by Johnson in the 17th century, outside his old residence in central London.

His *Plan of a Dictionary*, together with his prefaces to the finished work in its successive editions, his history of the English language, and his "Grammar of the English Tongue," have now been collected in the latest superb volume of the Yale edition of his works under the title *Johnson on the English Language* (Yale University Press, 548 pages, $85), edited by Gwin Kolb and Robert Demaria, Jr. The Yale edition, of which some 15 volumes have appeared over the last half-century, progresses—if that is the word—with a glacial slowness like some revived mastodon sluggishly emerging, limb by drowsy limb, from the ice. I come from a long-lived family and can just hope to hang on long enough to see the remaining volumes, and especially Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, finally appear.

In his very thorough plan for the dictionary, which he circulated in the hope of attracting patrons, Johnson laid out the principles he would follow. He would grapple not only with the various levels of signification attached to each term but with orthography and pronunciation—vexed matters in the 18th century—and with syntax and etymology as well. The effort would be difficult enough with rare or obscure words, but the chief obstacle lay in the abundance of simple everyday English words, and especially such verbs as "take" or "put" with their semantic shifts and well-nigh promiscuous affinities for prepositions that modified meaning ("take on," "take off," "take out": The list seems endless). In the end, Johnson gave the primary sense of "take" as "to receive what is offered" but went on for five large triple-columned pages to distinguish no

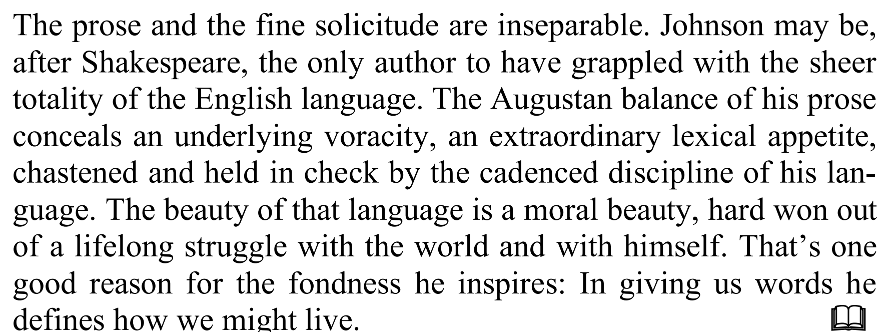
fewer than 134 different nuances of the verb.

In his advertisement to the fourth edition of the *Dictionary*, which appeared in 1773, Johnson admitted that "perfection is unattainable" but added, "I have left that inaccurate which never was made exact, and that imperfect which never was completed." In fact, Johnson's inaccuracies and downright errors were notorious in his own day, and he was often teased for them. Once, at a dinner party in Plymouth, a lady demanded of him how he could have given so inaccurate a definition of the word "pastern" (he'd termed it "the knee of an horse") to which Johnson replied, "Ignorance, Madam, ignorance." When the same lady pressed him with food, Johnson "rose up with his knife in his hand, and loudly exclaimed, 'I vow to God I cannot eat a bit more,' to the great terror of all."

This anecdote comes from a delightful new account titled *Defining the World: The Extraordinary Story of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 278 pages, $24), by Henry Hitchings. As much a biography of the dictionary as of its compiler, the book is arranged by lexical entries, beginning with "adventurous" and concluding with "zootomy." The gritty day-to-day work of lexicography, even in Johnson's stupendously disordered Gough Square garret, with his "staff" of scruffy down-and-out hacks and his resident cat Hodge (whom he liked to feed fresh oysters), wouldn't lend itself to thrilling narrative. Mr. Hitchings gets around this by light-footed hopping among unexpected entries, and the result is both entertaining and informative.

I've loved Johnson's writings and—presumptuously enough—Johnson himself, as he comes through in the biographies of Boswell and Walter Jackson Bate, for as long as I can remember. He's an author who inspires such perennial affection. In "On First Looking Into Bate's Life of Johnson," from his 2003 collection *The Calligraphy Shop*, the American poet Ben Downing praised Johnson's "peerless prose / with its lapidary dominoes / augustly toppling, clause after clause" but went on to pay more fervent homage to the deep and stubborn goodness of his life, what the poet nicely termed his "fine solicitudes."

The prose and the fine solicitude are inseparable. Johnson may be, after Shakespeare, the only author to have grappled with the sheer totality of the English language. The Augustan balance of his prose conceals an underlying voracity, an extraordinary lexical appetite, chastened and held in check by the cadenced discipline of his language. The beauty of that language is a moral beauty, hard won out of a lifelong struggle with the world and with himself. That's one good reason for the fondness he inspires: In giving us words he defines how we might live.



Eric Ormsby resides in Montreal, where he is a professor at McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies.

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