

The Interpretation of Samuel Johnson

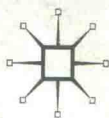
Edited by Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill

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DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON.



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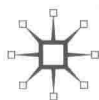
Edited by

Jonathan Clark

and

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Acknowledgements

This volume and its companions are the result of a collaborative enterprise, prepared for and anticipated over many years in the recent scholarly rethinking of Johnson, but executed within a shorter period of cooperation and exchange between its authors. In no sense do the chapters express a single position, agreed in advance. Rather, they reflect a common desire to question and challenge received interpretations, and to test and explore further the interpretations of fellow participants, who have exchanged drafts with each other during the process of composition and revision. The authors whose essays are included here therefore owe a debt of gratitude to each other, as well as to the wider community of historians and literary scholars whose diverse researches, in recent decades, have made this project of research and discovery possible. All the essays have been specially commissioned for this volume.

Preface

This volume is part of a trilogy dedicated to the reinterpretation of its subject, beginning with *Samuel Johnson in Historical Context* (Palgrave, 2002) and continuing in *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (Palgrave, 2012). In 2002, the present editors described Samuel Johnson as ‘perhaps the most commanding of the “commanding heights” of eighteenth-century English letters’ (‘Preface’, *SJHC*, p. x). Understandably, scholars had been locked in conflict for mastery of the interpretation of the man and his work. The volume that we then assembled offered historical contextualization as a methodology able to move understanding forward to a new Johnson, an ‘historic Johnson’, in contrast to the old vision of a ‘usable Johnson’, an image devised in the same decades of late modernism that saw the invention, primarily in the United States, of a ‘usable Locke’ and a ‘usable Burke’. The usable Johnson was an Olympian, detached from the conflicts of his day and therefore able to offer timeless moral guidance to the present. The historic Johnson proved to be much more interesting: a man polemically engaged in the religious and political conflicts of his age, divided between rival goals, and labouring to sustain a hard-won integrity that nevertheless developed over the course of his career.

In 2002, the editors underestimated the strength of the present-day commitments in academe that resisted the acceptance of new evidence. But resistance has had the opposite effect to that which the ‘Johnson deniers’ intended. Resistance has only encouraged yet more research, and this research has uncovered yet more evidence for the historic Johnson. We offer here and in our companion volume *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* a vision of the man and his age radically different from that which was available even thirty years ago. Readers are asked to consider these three volumes as parts of a related whole.

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Abbreviations

Add. MS(S)	Additional Manuscript(s)
AJ	<i>The Age of Johnson</i>
BL	The British Library
Boswell, <i>Journal of a Tour</i>	<i>Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., 1773</i> , ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (London, 1963)
Boswell, <i>Life</i>	James Boswell, <i>Boswell's Life of Johnson</i> , ed. George Birkbeck Hill and L. F. Powell (6 vols., Oxford, 1934–50)
Brack and Kelley, <i>Early Biographies</i>	O M Brack and Robert E. Kelley (eds.), <i>The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson</i> (Iowa City, 1974)
Clark, <i>Samuel Johnson</i>	Jonathan Clark, <i>Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism</i> (Cambridge, 1994)
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
Hawkins, <i>Life</i>	Sir John Hawkins, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> (2nd edn., London: J. Buckland et al., 1787)
Hawkins, <i>Life</i> , ed. Brack	Sir John Hawkins, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> , ed. O M Brack, Jr. (Athens, GA, 2009)
HJ	<i>Historical Journal</i>
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
ISJ	Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (eds.), <i>The Interpretation of Samuel Johnson</i> (Basingstoke, 2012)
Johnson, <i>Letters</i>	Bruce Redford (ed.), <i>The Letters of Samuel Johnson</i> (5 vols., Princeton, 1992–4)
Johnson, <i>Lives</i>	Samuel Johnson, <i>The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets</i> , ed. Roger Lonsdale (4 vols., Oxford, 2006)
<i>Johnsonian Miscellanies</i>	<i>Johnsonian Miscellanies</i> , ed. George Birkbeck Hill (2 vols., Oxford, 1897)
Kaminski, <i>Early Career</i>	Thomas Kaminski, <i>The Early Career of Samuel Johnson</i> (New York, 1987)

L.-M. Hawkins, <i>Anecdotes</i>	Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, <i>Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches and Memoirs</i> (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1822)
L.-M. Hawkins, <i>Memoirs</i>	Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins, <i>Memoirs, Anecdotes, Facts, and Opinions</i> (2 vols., London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green; and C. J. Rivington, 1824)
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PMLA	<i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
PRO	Public Record Office (now The National Archives)
PSJ	Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (eds.), <i>The Politics of Samuel Johnson</i> (Basingstoke, 2012)
Reade, <i>Johnsonian Gleanings</i>	Aleyn Lyell Reade, <i>Johnsonian Gleanings</i> (11 vols., privately printed, 1909–52)
SJHC	Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (eds.), <i>Samuel Johnson in Historical Context</i> (Basingstoke, 2002)
<i>Thraliana</i>	<i>Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776–1809</i> ed. Katharine C. Balderston (2nd edn., 2 vols., Oxford, 1953)
Waingrow (ed.), <i>Correspondence</i>	<i>The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Relating to the Making of the 'Life of Johnson'</i> , ed. Marshall Waingrow (2nd edn., Edinburgh, 2001)
Walpole, <i>Correspondence</i>	<i>The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence</i> , ed. W. S. Lewis (48 vols., New Haven, 1937–83)
<i>Yale Edition</i>	W. J. Bate et al. (eds.), <i>The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson</i> (New Haven, 1958–)

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
 Introduction	 1
<i>Howard Erskine-Hill</i>	
1 Planning a Life of Johnson	11
<i>F. P. Lock</i>	
2 Attack and Mask: James Boswell's Indebtedness to Sir John Hawkins' <i>Life of Samuel Johnson</i>	43
<i>O M Brack, Jr.</i>	
3 Boswell and the Making of Johnson	72
<i>Murray Pittock</i>	
4 'The Casuistical Question': Oaths and Hypocrisy in the Writings of Johnson and Bolingbroke	84
<i>Adrian Lashmore-Davies</i>	
5 Fire under the Ashes: Johnson's <i>Lives of the Poets</i> as Narratives of History	120
<i>Howard Erskine-Hill</i>	
6 Johnson, Macpherson and the <i>Memoirs of the Marshal Duke of Berwick</i>	165
<i>Niall MacKenzie</i>	
Conclusion: The Forgotten Room: Discovery and Denial in Recent Johnson Studies	202
<i>Jonathan Clark</i>	
 Index	 224

Introduction

Howard Erskine-Hill

The 'past' which modernists think ratifies the present, and the 'past' from which postmodernists think they can so easily emancipate themselves, is a 'past' which they first select to prove their point.¹

There is a problem and a paradox in Johnsonian studies. Many critics want to discover that Johnson was in many ways like themselves. It is good for the vanity to discover that when you were, formally speaking, writing about Johnson, you were in some part writing about yourself. The inner psyche of the commentator seems to yield insights into the inner psyche of the subject. This approach has become more problematic, since we are now drawing away from the New Criticism which made it almost a point of virtue to extract the great writer from his time. If knowledge of that time were necessary, this movement then argued, that meant the writer was not great.

The New Criticism may be thought one of the successful intellectual developments of the twentieth century, and still prevails, in modified form, in literary study. It set aside biography and context in favour of rigorous and detailed aesthetic analysis of the literary text. Arising in the 1920s with the earlier critical essays of T. S. Eliot, it passed into more pedagogical form in I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929). The torch was carried further by Yvor Winters, F. R. Leavis and William Empson whose last collection, *The Drama*, was published in 1994.

Scholars who wished to combine the new critical scrutiny of texts with an equally rigorous study of context, historical and intellectual, have encountered a wider problem: the slow erosion of historical knowledge in schools and universities on either side of the Atlantic. Historiography made striking advances during the last century, but became a much

more specialized vocation, beyond which a general knowledge of history has died away. Nevertheless, despite the residual influence of the New Criticism and the decline of historical knowledge in the wider culture, some form of historicism – that is to say, attention to the religious, political and social context – is now, surely rightly, involved in the literary interpretation and assessment of earlier writers.

The difficulty of securing academic acceptance for the invocation of the historical settings of past authors should not be underestimated. Recent historiography has not generally won through into the minds of those who write about literature. A literary scholar who has earned plaudits for the subtlety of her or his critical analysis of a famous text is unlikely to possess much knowledge of the times out of which that text grew. This, of course, affects some authors more than others, though woe betide anyone who thinks *Wuthering Heights*, built on a rock of social history, is all about timeless passion. In the case of Johnson we have an author obviously and consciously caught up in the history, politics and religion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is a truism that the historiography of Britain in the long eighteenth century was once dominated by the 'Whig interpretation'; but it took surprisingly long, in recent decades, for any alternative interpretation to establish itself. That diversification of perspective has now occurred, however, and for Johnson's age it foregrounds dynastic discontinuity and its lasting disruptive consequences. The new narrative contends that the Tories under the first two Hanoverian monarchs were a potentially powerful political force but were effectively barred from office under Sunderland and Walpole. They were a generally well-organized opposition, many though not all of whom looked for a restoration of the Stuarts to retrieve their liberties, restore the illegally lengthened triennial parliaments and regain influence and power. A highly influential figure among the Tories was Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751). A confident, brilliant and mercurial figure, he was Secretary during the last years of Queen Anne, was attainted on the accession of George I, became Secretary of State to James III, was dismissed by that king on the failure of the 1715 rising, bribed his way back into England, and was a remarkable and influential guide to the Tories throughout the long ministry of Sir Robert Walpole and after. He masterminded the famous opposition journal, *The Craftsman*, between 1726 and 1736. He seems at heart to have been a free-thinker in religion. His heterodox religious views were during his life concealed from even such close friends as Alexander Pope, but were published after his death. Johnson's contemptuous remark on this, as recorded by Boswell, is well known;

less well known is Sir John Hawkins' remark that Johnson's *London* and other Tory writings in the later 1730s were in debt to journals like *The Craftsman*.²

The life of Bolingbroke is bound to have been important to Johnson, raising fundamental questions of political and religious fidelity and infidelity, and the moral importance of outward behaviour. What did Johnson think about Bolingbroke's Jacobite episode? When, near the end of his life, he came to read the *Memoirs of the Duke of Berwick*, whose author held that the greatest mistake of James III was his dismissal of Bolingbroke, Johnson must have been, at the very least, powerfully interested. Adrian Lashmore-Davies, in this volume, discusses the 'Casuistical Question' – the ethical mid-ground between pledge and betrayal and an important theme in Johnson's thought.

It will be obvious that if one credits a two-narrative picture of Johnson's England, Johnson's own role as a talker and as a writer ceases to be that of an outrageous if lovable eccentric; he comes into focus as a serious opposition figure, loyal to the older Church of England, a Nonjuror and intellectual Jacobite even after the last serious Jacobite attempt, Choiseul's project for a naval invasion in 1759, had been abandoned.³ It is clear that, on a pragmatic level, he was better pleased with George III than George II. The orientation of Johnson's political thought is made apparent in Boswell's MS of their *Tour to the Hebrides* in 1773 (this fuller manuscript version was not published until 1936).⁴ Even when the years of possession of the crown by the Hanoverian dynasty were beginning to pile up against the previous possession by the Stuarts, Johnson had 'difficulty ... as to the right still in some measure belonging to that unfortunate family'.⁵

The latest wave of thinking about Johnson the Jacobite-inclined, Nonjuring Tory goes back to 1984, but continues to spread.⁶ The furious resistance it encountered – often from scholars who seemed at the outset not to know too much about Nonjuring, Jacobitism or eighteenth-century Toryism – revealed some deeper presuppositions about the then current study of Johnson. The two numbers of *The Age of Johnson*, vols. 7 and 8 (1996–7) are, though uneven, relevant here. A more civilized world of discourse is reopened in the work of two recent Johnsonian editors: Roger Lonsdale's distinguished and learned edition of *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* and David Womersley's recent edition of Boswell's *Life*.⁷ Roger Lonsdale, in his formidable edition, has a disappointingly brief 'Note on Politics', which does little justice to the political dimension of Johnson's writings, including *The Lives of the Poets* itself. I have therefore thought it not unforgivable, in my own

contribution to the present volume, to refer to the chief evidence for the newer view of Johnson. The present volume, then, offers to go beyond the work of Lonsdale and Womersley in certain respects.

The state of learning changes regularly. It seeks, at present, more close-in historical views, while not denying multiple contingency, unforeseen consequences, or loyalty to 'a broken king' or the call of 'an antique drum'. Neither inevitable brokenness nor, certainly, antiquity, were invariably relegated by those often combative *alumni* of the past, certainly including Johnson. It is clear that, in the light of quite recent work, we need a new, more detailed and more balanced biography of Johnson. This is promoted here, not only by F. P. Lock's widely intelligent and deeply considered programme for such a new biography, but also by O M Brack's essay on the significance of the biography of Sir John Hawkins, now for the first time properly edited.⁸ Hawkins published evidence which Boswell was willing to ignore.

A new biography of Johnson can build on important recent scholarship. Paul Monod's rich and well-researched essay, 'A Voyage out of Staffordshire; or, Samuel Johnson's Jacobite Journey', in *Samuel Johnson in Historical Context*,⁹ was waiting to be written, yet no previous Johnsonian had done it. A harder project was another essay published in the same volume, Jonathan Clark's 'Religion and Political Identity: Samuel Johnson as a Nonjuror'. This may have been the first major piece of serious archival research on Johnson for some decades. It might, in principle, have revealed that Johnson took the crucial Oath of Abjuration. But the evidence is that he did not. Not when he left Oxford as an undergraduate, since he did not take a degree at that time. (A new essay on Nonjuring at Oxford in Johnson's time, by Matthew Davis, is soon to appear in *The Age of Johnson*.) Not, it now appears, in connection with either of his subsequent schoolmastering jobs, when normally the oath would have been required. Not when he was summoned to bear arms in the London trained bands in 1755.¹⁰

Johnson's enemies are perennially interesting, but how many Johnsonians appreciate that James Macpherson was not only famous – or notorious – for his version of Ossian, but was an innovative historian of the first importance? Yet this verdict is justified by his *The History of Great Britain, from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hannover* (2 vols., London, 1775) and *Original Papers; Containing the Secret History of Great Britain, from the Restoration, to the Accession of the House of Hannover* (2 vols., London, 1775), the latter presenting alternate extracts from Stuart correspondence and Hanover correspondence, most of the Stuart correspondence being from the exiled court.¹¹ The

second work published the evidence for some of his claims in the *History*. One would have thought Johnson would, in principle, have been interested in this work, but perhaps the Ossian controversy overshadowed, for him, the other productions of Macpherson. Niall MacKenzie, in the present volume, elucidates, with detailed learning, this interesting relationship, which culminated – at the literary level – in the publication of the *Memoirs of the Duke of Berwick*, with Johnson's encouragement but not with a requested Preface by him. The English translation of the *Memoirs* naturally made use of Macpherson the historian.

Johnson's friends can be more controversial than his enemies. At nearly the same time the Yale Edition of Johnson's *Works* and of the Boswell MSS were launched. The two great enterprises seem to have incited rivalry as well as cooperation; indeed the conflicts of the Tories and the Whigs were nothing compared with these. Donald Greene argued that Johnson deserved to be studied separately from the Boswellian record. He was surely right – to some degree the primary material must be Johnson's own writings, including his letters and prayers. Unfortunately – or fortunately¹² – Boswell still remains Johnson's major biographer, the source not only of a great deal which would not otherwise have been recorded, but also of a record which can be compared with two other contemporary biographical sources: Sir John Hawkins and Hester Lynch Thrale. Murray Pittock here writes a brilliant and bravura essay which, almost simultaneously, catches his flair and his faults.

One might add that Johnson would never have achieved his current iconic status as a great eighteenth-century writer had it not been for Boswell's brilliant, gripping and popular narrative. Johnson is a great eighteenth-century writer, but it is not clear whether he is greater than Swift, or Pope, or Gibbon. What we have to do, therefore, is not to relegate Boswell, but to learn how better to interpret him. Boswell has been accused of exaggerating Johnson's Jacobitism because he, Boswell, was a sentimental Jacobite. The editing of the MSS of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, a formidable task, is not yet complete, but the manuscript evidence thus far suggests that Boswell was not playing up, but rather playing down, Johnson's Jacobitism. Boswell did this by conjecturally pushing the date of various Jacobite remarks chronologically back, or by softening Johnson's diction, or by turning them into comedy: 'My dear, I hope you are a Jacobite.'¹³

In two salient instances Boswell does not merely play down Jacobite allusions made by himself in his own manuscripts, but excludes them altogether. In his *Journal of my Jaunt* MS (1762) he records Hume saying

of Johnson that he was 'a keen Jacobite yet hates the Scotch'.¹⁴ This Boswell omits, while taking other material from that early journal. A later instance concerns Johnson's acceptance of his pension. Boswell's MSS relating to this episode have been minutely examined by Allen Reddick. Boswell drafted and redrafted what he wanted to say about this crucial matter but what he erased at an early stage were the words: 'Johnson though distinguished for his aversion to the two first Princes of the House of Hanover'.¹⁵ I would only add that Reddick's conclusion that Boswell disapproved of Johnson's acceptance of the pension does not follow from the MSS of this episode. Boswell is likely to have been more concerned with defending Johnson from charges of inconsistency.

We know from the manuscripts of the *Tour to the Hebrides*, not published until the Isham Edition of 1936, that Boswell was interested in Jacobitism. He says in this MS:

I have a kind of *liking* for Jacobitism, something that it is not easy to define. I should guard against it; for from what I have now put down, it is certain that my calm reasoning stops short at action, so that doing anything violent in support of the cause would only be following a sort of passion or warm whim. And talking much in favour of it may even in this more secure and liberal reign hurt a man in his rising in life.¹⁶

Boswell was thus, as late as 1773, both fascinated by Jacobitism and on his guard against showing sympathy for it. Such sympathy, or 'liking', need not, to have brought trouble, have been autobiographically expressed. The biography of a Jacobite sympathizer might be, short of overt political repudiation of Stuart claims, still dangerous to the biographer. It will certainly have seemed so in 1784, when the work Boswell had long planned confronted him as the last and greatest literary challenge of his life.

One precedent is unlikely to have gone unnoticed by Boswell. The year before Johnson died, John Nichols, Johnson's assistant and encourager in *The Lives of the Poets*, published *The Epistolary Correspondence, Visitation Charges, Speeches and Miscellanies of the Rt. Revd. Francis Atterbury, D.D., Lord Bishop of Rochester, With Historical Notes*, and, as epigraph, two lines in praise of Atterbury by Pope. This edition included Atterbury's speech in his own defence in the House of Lords, the text having been obtained from Atterbury's son-in-law, and longer than the officially published version. It is out of the question that Nichols did not know that Atterbury had, in exile, become de facto Secretary of State to James III,