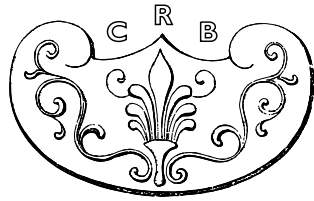




CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS
SPECIAL EDITION



LIVES OF JOHNSON

Book Review by Jack Lynch

Samuel Johnson: A Biography, by Peter Martin.
Harvard/Belknap, 608 pages, \$35

Samuel Johnson: The Struggle, by Jeffrey Meyers.
Basic Books, 528 pages, \$35

IN JUNE 1800, THE *MONTHLY REVIEW* WROTE of the recently deceased writer Horace Walpole, “we have heard many of his friends express a wish that he had found a Boswell to catch and record” the “ludicrous stories” he told. It had been just nine years since James Boswell published his *Life of Johnson*, but already his name had become a common noun: “a Boswell.” Boswell was a Scottish lawyer who met his hero, the great critic and lexicographer Samuel Johnson, in 1763, and wrote a monumental biography about him in 1791. His book became not only the most famous biography of Samuel Johnson, but the most famous biography in English—perhaps in any language. Many go so far as to say that Boswell invented modern biography.

Boswell deserves credit for his remarkable artistry, but he was lucky in his choice of subject. Samuel Johnson was a fabulously complex figure. He spoke with an authority that brooked no contradiction, but he was riddled with insecurities. He seemed to embody Augustan self-confidence, and yet he lived in constant fear of insanity. He was often filthy poor, always eccentric, and proud. He could be shockingly rude, jealous, and petulant, but also charitable, generous, and sympathetic. He knew how to wound with a calculated bit of misogyny, but there was no greater supporter of female intellectuals than he. As a monarchist he valued social order, but he detested slavery so much that he called for violent slave rebellions.

Johnson was born in Lichfield, in England’s West Midlands, in 1709, and grew up to be the dominant literary figure of his day—maybe even

the most famous man alive. He did it against tremendous odds. He suffered from a list of physical and psychological maladies straight out of the Book of Job, including tuberculosis of the lymph nodes, asthma, gout, near blindness, strange twitches and spasms, overwhelming depression, and probably Tourette’s Syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder to boot. Physicians didn’t think he’d survive infancy.

He somehow proved them wrong, and went on to become a brilliant student. But he was forced to leave Oxford after a year for want of money, and languished in the provinces as a frustrated schoolmaster. He married a woman 20 years his senior, wasted her money, then more or less abandoned her in Lichfield to settle in London, where he hoped to become a star on the strength of his Latin scholarship and a verse tragedy set in Constantinople in 1453. But the market for Latin scholarship and verse tragedies was little better in Johnson’s day than in ours, and so he was forced to become a hack writer, eking out a living as a translator and journalist. In spite of it all, he eventually found fame, especially for his monumental *Dictionary of the English Language*—though not the first English dictionary, it made the competition look trivial. He went on to edit the works of Shakespeare, to write dozens of poems and hundreds of essays, and to compose one of the most influential collections of literary biography ever assembled.

Boswell’s achievement was capturing some of the complexity of his subject, and in giving us a portrait of Johnson, he gave a portrait of the entire age. The full title of the *Life*, in all its 18th-

century glory, hints at the book’s scope: *The Life 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*. What’s amazing is that it’s not an exaggeration: Boswell really does exhibit a view of a half-century of British literary life. That’s why the *Life*, so packed with material, features on many lists of desert-island books.

BOSWELL IS A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW, BUT many biographers have tried: the Library of Congress’s catalog lists over a hundred other book-length biographies of Johnson. But it’s been a generation since anyone has taken up the challenge, and we’re overdue. It’s therefore welcome news that two experienced biographers, Jeffrey Meyers and Peter Martin, have seized the opportunity presented by Johnson’s 300th birthday, which took place in September 2009, to give us the first Johnsonian biographies of the 21st century.

The two biographers have much in common. Both combine scholarly training with experience in writing for popular audiences. Both make Johnson’s story accessible to novices without being condescending to those who’ve already discovered him. Both have read extensively, though neither turns up anything really new. Both put Johnson in a modern context,



and challenge the facile assumption that the 18th-century Tory would always agree with a 21st-century conservative.

Most important, both also give us a portrait of Johnson as a tormented outsider. Meyers's subtitle, *The Struggle*, could apply just as well to Martin's book; both describe Johnson's lifelong struggle against physical ailments and mental torments. Boswell captures this aspect of Johnson's psychology well:

His mind resembled the vast amphitheatre, the Colisæum at Rome. In the centre stood his judgement, which like a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehensions that, like the wild beasts of the *Arena*, were all around in cells, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drives them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still assailing him.

BUT THERE ARE ALSO, INEVITABLY, DIFFERENCES between the two biographers, and, given their appearance at the same time, it's impossible not to compare them. They differ first in their attention to detail. Though both authors have academic credentials, Martin has remained immersed in the scholarly world, while Meyers left it long ago. Martin has patiently composed scholarly biographies of two 18th-century figures, Boswell and Edmond Malone; Meyers has been a prolific chronicler of 19th- and 20th-century figures like Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and Humphrey Bogart, turning out biographies at an impressive clip.

The difference in training and work habits sometimes shows. Meyers, for instance, can be sloppy with numbers, and he makes many errors that someone more versed in the Johnsonian scholarship would have avoided. His comparative lack of familiarity with the period leads him to render anachronistic judgments, as when he notes with horror that Johnson, while a schoolmaster, sometimes beat his students—the practice was universal in Johnson's day—or shows surprise that Johnson, an anti-vivisectionist, ignored the medical benefits from animal experiments, long before animal experiments had delivered any recognizable medical benefits. Names are spelled wrong; dates are inaccurate; discredited myths are repeated. Contrary to Meyers's assertions, there's no contemporary evidence that smallpox scarred Johnson's face; George Psalmanazar never taught missionar-

ies the Formosan language; and it wasn't David Garrick but Nahum Tate who gave *King Lear* a happy ending decades before Garrick was born. Meyers writes that Johnson's *Dictionary* "gathered more words than anyone had ever done before," but Nathan Bailey, Johnson's most important predecessor, defined almost 50% more words. It would be easy to extend the list.

Most of these are venial sins, though some other mistakes are more important. Meyers misrepresents the composition of *The Lives of the Poets*, the great work at the end of Johnson's career. Meyers writes about Johnson's "extreme condensation and haste to finish" it, making it sound as if Johnson neglected his responsibility to his publishers. In fact the booksellers asked him to provide only "a concise account of the life of each author"; he obliged with ten volumes of critical biography, far surpassing what the publishers' expectations. He was slow about it, as was often his way; but "extreme condensation" misses the point altogether.

At the same time, the fact that Meyers approaches the 18th century as an outsider has benefits. He's more patient than Martin in explaining social contexts and strange manners. He also offers more insightful close readings of Johnson's writing, though he sometimes resorts to unnecessary paraphrase. This means Meyers probably offers a better introduction for fledgling Johnsonians.

Meyers and Martin also differ in their use of source material. Meyers, like many biographers of Johnson, is too trusting of Boswell, uncritically repeating stories that have not withstood scrutiny. Martin, even though he wrote a life of Boswell, gives us what may be the least Boswellian of the major biographies of Johnson. Martin knows his way around the obscure sources much better than Meyers. If anything, he relies on those other sources too much, at the cost of originality.

The most controversial thing in either book is Meyers's treatment of a mysterious episode in Johnson's life. He once wrote in his diary, "*De pedicis et manicis insana cogitatio*"—Latin for "insane thoughts about shackles and handcuffs." The 1823 sale catalogue of the personal effects of Johnson's beloved, Hester Thrale Piozzi, includes "Johnson's Padlock committed to my care in the year 1768." Since this material turned up, some have speculated about an "erotic maladjustment" in Johnson, who engaged in "masochistic fantasies" and demanded sadomasochistic sex play from Mrs. Thrale. Martin follows most

biographers of the last half-century: the "suggestion that Johnson may have taken a perverse sexual pleasure in such confinement," he writes curtly, "has been discredited"; the usual explanation is that Johnson entrusted his friend with the lock in case he ever went insane and posed a danger to himself or others. For Meyers, on the other hand, this is a "crucial issue in Johnson's life," and he tries to establish that Johnson was engaged in a "closet drama of...ritualistic whippings." But Meyers is so determined to make his case that he distorts the evidence. He writes, for instance, of Johnson's "use of padlocks, chains and whips, first discovered by Katherine Balderston in 1949"—it's more likely to be carelessness than dishonesty that led him to put "whips" on the list, but they're mentioned nowhere in his sources. Needless to say, confident assertions about naughty whippings become less compelling when the word "whips" is erased from the evidence. The case remains unproved—not because, as Meyers puts it, Johnson's modern acolytes have been unable "to reconcile his obsession with their exalted image of the great moralist and stern philosopher," but because unsupported speculation is always reckless.

IN A WAY IT'S UNFORTUNATE THAT TWO FINE biographies should have come out at the same time, forcing themselves to compete with one another. But Johnson knew that there could be advantages to competition. Boswell once asked Johnson about two histories of music published at the same time:

Both Sir John Hawkins's and Dr. Burney's History of Musick had then been advertised. I asked if this was not unlucky: would not they hurt one another?—Johnson. "No, sir. They will do good to one another. Some will buy the one, some the other, and compare them; and so a talk is made about a thing, and the books are sold."

Some will buy *Samuel Johnson: A Biography*, some *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle*, and they'll compare them. The important thing is that a talk is made about them, and about Johnson himself. Johnson is a rich subject deserving of many biographies, and these are both good places to start.

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