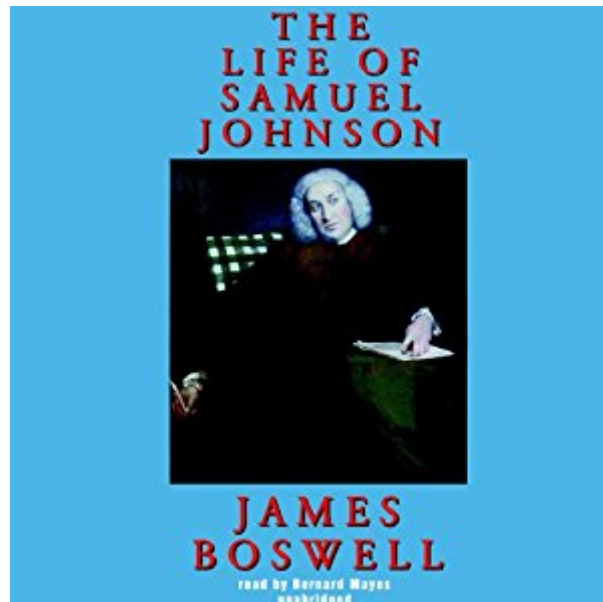


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# The Life Of Samuel Johnson



## Synopsis

James Boswell forever changed the genre of biography when he painstakingly transformed a scholarly profusion of detail into a perceptive, lifelike portrait of Dr. Samuel Johnson. James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* reveals a man of outsized appetites and private vulnerabilities and is the source of much of what we know about one of the towering figures of English literature. Boswell spent a great deal of time with Johnson in his final years and from his scrupulously accurate memory and copious journal was able to faithfully record the brilliance and wit of Dr. Johnson's conversation. Boswell's aim and achievement was completeness; no detail was too small for him. On this point Dr. Johnson remarked to him, "There is nothing, sir, too little for so little a creature as man." Boswell's thirst for detail makes this indisputably the finest of many biographies of Johnson. This biography gained its unique place in literary history from the fact that its style was revolutionary. The usual style of biographers of that era was to record dry facts from the subject's public life only. Boswell differed by incorporating actual conversations of Dr. Johnson, which Boswell had previously noted down in journals, and by including many more details of personal life. The result revolutionized the genre. For both its subject and its style, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is still popular with modern critics and students of the history of English thought and of English literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Note: I made some immature Mormon angry because of my negative reviews of books that attempted to prove the Book of Mormon, and that person has been slamming my reviews almost as fast as they are posted. I must have really burned him or her because I've deleted this review and

re-posted it and within an hour, I had a "not helpful" vote. Give me a break. That person's faith must be very fragile, indeed. Oh, well. I'm trying to be "helpful," and you can see that it took some work to put this review together. So, your "helpful" votes are appreciated. Thanks, and I hope you find some enjoyable quotations (below) from Boswell's wonderful book, but first a little history. Samuel Johnson, the irascible but generous lexicographer of the eighteenth century, is mostly remembered because of Boswell, and Boswell is remembered because he wrote Johnson's biography. At the time, Johnson was already famous for his "Dictionary of the English Language," an impressive work for the year 1755. Among many other writings, Johnson put out an edition of Shakespeare's works (1765), with valuable notes that are still referred to today. Johnson published a "series of grave and moral discourses" in the periodical called the Rambler, but when it was translated into Italian, it came out as the ludicrous "El Vagabondo," something far from Johnson's pious intentions. And of good intentions, it was Johnson who said, "Sir, Hell is paved with good intentions." (Johnson's) defense of tea against Mr. Jonas Hanway's violent attack upon that elegant and popular beverage, shows how very well a man of genius can write upon the slightest subject, when he writes, as the Italians say, *con amore*.

Almost two years ago, I gave this five stars. On reading much more about Boswell and his procedures, I have to qualify my earlier review. If you want a book about Johnson that tells how one man saw him, then yes, it still merits five stars. If you want a full perspective of Johnson - - as the word biography would imply, I'd downgrade it to three stars. So on balance, four. There are of course many positives, or I wouldn't have given it 5 stars two years ago. Boswell had a strong talent for recording Johnson's conversations, and they are wonderful. Some of them are down right hilarious! Boswell was also a bit of a dramatist, setting up situations such as Johnson's meeting with Wilkes, placing bets over whether he would challenge Johnson on his habit of hiding orange peels. And Boswell could tell a story very dramatically - - it's his dramatic skills and memory which have been the basis on which his champions have defended him. However, as a 'biography' this leaves much to be desired. Not just the issue of scope, with some 80% of the pages being on 20 years of Johnson's life. Boswell just wasn't a biographer, his story is too personal, he inadequately integrates important opinions, and he suppresses important information that's inconsistent with his rather simple view of Johnson. As Richard Schwartz has excellently pointed out, Boswell has presented us with an unshaped series of details, where data do not converge to a whole, and remain undigested. Inaccuracies: Boswell tells us early on that he sometimes scurried across London to verify a date, but he apparently wouldn't consult a perpetual calendar; there are a number of

occasions where his dates don't align with the day of week, yet his certainty in dating events make it all sound so true.

'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,' Samuel Johnson. Sorry, it is a hobby. Samuel Johnson the writer of the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language, which was a very big deal in his day as the elite felt the English language was in decline due to it being influenced by so many foreign influences and the marvel of Samuel Johnson's efforts and method of writing made him, according to Lord Chesterfield's Letters (Oxford World's Classics), as someone to be deferred to as the "Caesar" of the English language. Samuel Johnson, along with his friend and former pupil David Garrick, helped place Shakespeare as the permanent king of the English language; further, Johnson was a great and singular essayist and has an eternal place as a minor poet of the English language. His dictionary shot Johnson into the inner circle of elite in English society. Boswell's "Life of Samuel Johnson" is a fascinating read as Boswell traces Johnson's life story. Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, a friend of his, and together the center of English political and cultural life with the 'Literary Club' that they had both started were big players in forming the English reaction to the major liberal events going on in their day and could be said to be the fathers of modern conservatism. They were alive to face the genesis of modern liberalism, in the form of Jean Jacques Rousseau along with the American Revolution, theirs was the conservative response. 'What hypocrites are the drivers of negroes to be demanding liberty,' Johnson in reference to the Americans.

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