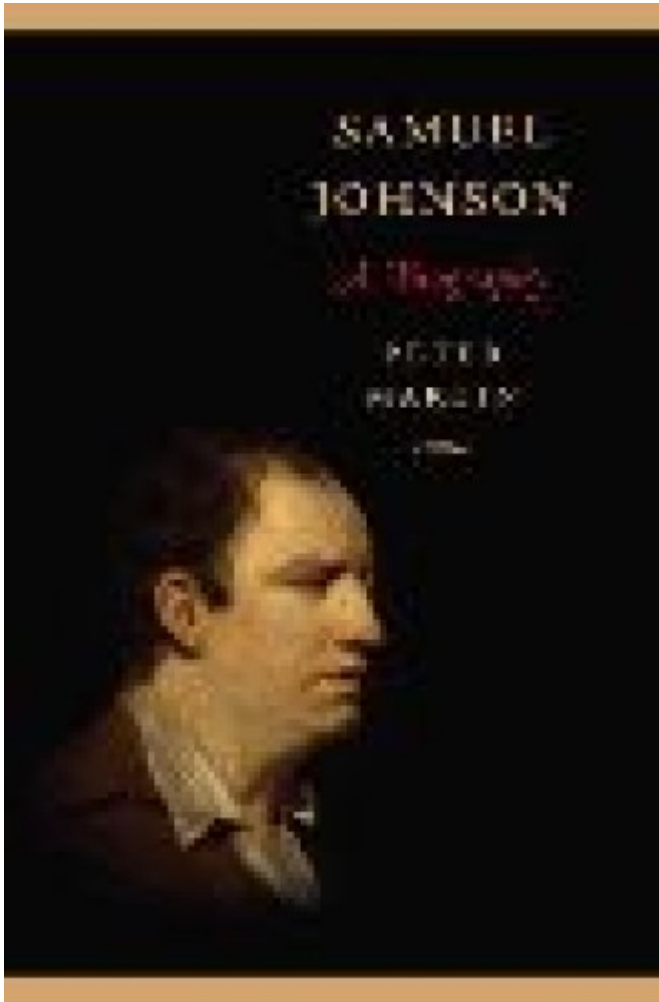


Samuel Johnson: A Biography

reviewed by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Samuel Johnson: A Biography

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James Boswell is a hard act to follow. His *Life of Johnson*, written at close range after more hours in pubs and miles of travel with his eccentric subject than most could

have withstood, is detailed, witty, literate and still engaging over two centuries later. It sets a high bar for biography; Boswell himself calls the undertaking “a presumptuous task.” But searching hindsight, generations of scholarship and a clear sense of contemporary purposes can more than justify a new look at a life as rich and strange as Samuel Johnson’s.

Peter Martin has risen to that task in a highly readable, informed narrative that gently brings modern psychological and clinical awareness to bear on the lexicographer’s famous tics, gastric troubles, myopia and melancholia while also inviting readers to consider with compassion the loneliness of an exceptional mind. Like any fine biography, it provides its own answer to the question of what the uses are of the past, and it inspires fresh reflection on our own ways of recognizing and fostering “the best that is being thought and said.”

The voracious curiosity that fueled Johnson’s copious reading and famous nightlong conversations led him in 1773, at 64, to undertake an ambitious tour of Scotland with Boswell, his junior by 31 years. Johnson’s health and spirits were far from reliable, and his irascibility had increased with age, though a quick and lively sense of humor (“He laughs like a rhinoceros”) and commitment to rational argument sustained their friendship through years of shifting fortunes as well as miles of demanding travel on horseback.

What he sought on that trip was unclear at the outset; his restless mind seemed simply to need more scope. He enjoyed the countryside while its botanical oddities furnished intellectual entertainment, but soon urged a hasty retreat to the city. He came to regard the wilds of rural Scotland as a “naked desert” and wrote that “philosophers like Rousseau who try to argue that such a place is happy . . . are deluding themselves.” During their sojourn at St. Andrews, the intellectual giant, already a legend, seemed less interested in the academic worthies of that town than “in an old woman who lived in the ruins of the cathedral vault with her cat and ‘claimed a hereditary residence in it.’”

It was typical of Johnson to focus on an eccentric, marginal or needy person who clung to the edges of an economy that provided little in the way of a social safety net: for decades of his adult life, while he himself frequently fell into debt, he sheltered and provided for his alcoholic wife, a young African freed from slavery, a blind woman, an impecunious scholar and a reformed prostitute, along with other rabble who found their way into his chaotic household. In the garret of that house he

gathered piles of books and a few underpaid amanuenses to patch together the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language.

If he had done nothing else noteworthy, the English-speaking world would owe Johnson grateful recognition for his brash effort to regularize—but not regulate—the rich, confluent, malleable trove of words that have mediated such vast realms of human experience. Unlike the French, who approached the task in a much more systematic manner, Johnson combed volumes of literature for sentences that offered interesting usages and validated multiple meanings, and he based his orthography on common practices rather than abstract principles. In one of the most engaging chapters of his lively biography, Martin traces methods of scholarship that would drive most researchers “around the bend,” as the British say. But Johnson’s genius lay not only in his reason but also in his tolerance and taste for the irregular, the singular, the anomalous and the anecdotal. “He recognized,” Martin writes, “that the imposition of embalming strictures of usage on language flew in the face of what language is all about.” In the course of his writing the dictionary, “his ideas about the nature of language changed and remain complex.” With characteristic aphoristic conclusiveness, Johnson declared, “Language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived.”

Certainly his own life testifies to the fragility of worldly permanence. With both candor and respect for the complexities of circumstance, Martin deftly balances a harsh record of hurtful encounters, failed relationships with women, and financial mismanagement with a compelling and compassionate story of a man much afflicted (with, it appears, some form of Tourette’s syndrome, extreme nearsightedness, chronic abdominal distress and bouts of deep depression) who never fit comfortably into a social niche but rose from repeated personal and professional defeats to produce a body of prose that still surprises with its incisive, vigorous reflection on matters moral, political, scientific and spiritual. He wrote sermons, poetry, scientific essays, political pamphlets, biography, literary criticism, prayers, prefaces and anonymous addenda to other people’s works, often redefining the genre in which he worked. If the measure of the heroic is spiritual and intellectual capaciousness, surely Johnson deserves his lasting status as a hero of English letters.

This biography goes well beyond reaffirmation in its treatment of the intricate interdependence of native genius, psychological need and spiritual longing. Whereas many authors present Johnson’s work in terms of its powerful rationality, Martin not only recognizes but foregrounds the nonrational dimensions of his unusual mind.

Johnson practiced a lifelong piety that left him deeply distressed by his abrupt and hurtful behaviors. His Tory sympathies were held in significant tension with abolitionist, populist and what might even be called socialist leanings. He despised imperialism in an age of expanding empire and eschewed the divine right of kings even as he argued in support of monarchy. He supported the arts while holding much artistic practice in contempt. He cared for the poor even as he depended, sometimes abjectly, on the patronage of the very wealthy. He was unmannerly and uncouth but also consummately kind.

Perhaps the duration of Johnson's friendships offers the most useful measure of the man. Martin draws on a variety of contemporaneous sources to sketch striking portraits of the remarkable cast of characters who remained doggedly loyal to this difficult, great-hearted giant of a human being. His presentations of Boswell and of Johnson's other intimate biographer, Mrs. Thrale, who cared for him like family in the latter decades of his life, invite us to reflect on the mystery of affection that is capable of surviving volatile mood swings, occasional verbal abuse and exceedingly odd behavior. Johnson's wife, Elizabeth ("Tetty"), has her own sad story, in light of which her eventual lapse into indigence and alcoholism seem less a personal failure than a testimony to the lack of social support for women and families that Johnson himself recognized—even though, as a child of a dismal union, he had little training in marital skills.

In these and other vignettes, Martin reminds us that no life can be lived or remembered in isolation. This biography contributes to the deconstruction of a legend even as it reminds us what we stand to gain by allowing, and even encouraging, the unorthodox curiosities, oddball methods, idiosyncratic practices and extrainstitutional extravagance of the gifted among us. Johnson's was an irregular and unregulated life. As such, it serves as a timely warning against the kinds of institutional control that kill the spirit. Real genius is prophetic, and recognizing, welcoming and fostering geniuses and prophets requires that the rest of us resist the fears that lead to their suppression, that we practice an intellectual and spiritual generosity that can make room for them. The ways they challenge the structures they cannot fit may be a gift to us all.