



Jane Austen Society of North America Vancouver Chapter

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Christmas Fayre, and Everyday Fayre, in Early Fort York



The following selections are from Dorothy Duncan's book *Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst: Everyday Life in Upper Canada, 1812-1814*. Dorothy is a member of JASNA Toronto, and a prize-winning Canadian historian. Her book, published this year by Dundurn Press, "explores the everyday lives of those trying to survive and prosper in this sparsely populated land of astonishing harshness, beauty, and bounty in the years leading up to the War of 1812, and during the conflict."

Fort York became the capital of Upper Canada in 1793, and it was soon a thriving little community, as the following delightful vignette attests:

By 1812 a stroll along King street would have confirmed that many merchants had opened shops. The most popular was Mrs Lumsden's Confectionary where, in addition to peppermint pastilles, sugar sticks, marzipan figures and other treats, she offered a wide range of gingerbread hearts, fishes, ponies, parrots and dogs. No doubt Mrs Lumsden's wares appealed to "children of all ages", and the gingerbreads would have been a special Christmas treat for the little ones.

Next are diary entries from Joseph Willcocks, an Irishman who came out to Fort York in 1798. It would appear that he was a man who, like Samuel Johnson, "minded his belly" ve-r-r-r-y attentively.

19th September, 1800. I went to the Humber on a pleasure party with Mr and Miss Russell (and others). We left York at 10 o'clock and reached the Humber in Mr Jarvis' boat at half past 12. We walked for about an hour and dined at half past 1. We had for Dinner a piece of Cold Roast Beef, Cold ham, cold chickens & hot stewed Wild Duck. We all arrived home safe at 5 o'clock in the evening.



30th September, 1800. I dined with Mr Small Rugless and Mr James Ruggles. We had for dinner a Salmon, two Perch, a piece of Roast Beef, a Brace of Pheasant, rashers, and Peas. I spent the evening at home...read part of Gulliver's Travels.

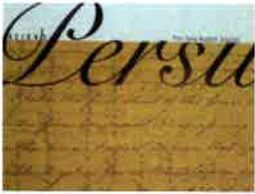
3rd October, 1800. Went shooting to the island - got nothing - Returned to Dinner and had a loin of Roast Mutton, a Broiled Chicken and some Pork, a Bread Pudding. Went to Willcock's after Dinner & from thence to a Puppet Show the Performance very indifferent, the Weather very fine.

Thursday, 25th December, 1800. Went to Church. Weekes dines with us we had for Dinner soup Roast Beef, boiled Turkey, Plum Pudding & mince pies. We had supper for the first time in my remembrance I came to bed at 12. It was a very fine day. Playter called for some camomile. (*Editor's note: No wonder Playter, whoever he may have been, called for camomile tea!*)

Saturday, 28th March, 1801. We tapped a Cask of Madaira -- we had for dinner minced veal, soup, Pigs Cheek, Eggs & pudding...Mr Ridout and Mr Denison called in the evening...Mr Willcocks gave a large supper party...

3rd April, 1801. A vessel arrived from Kingston the first this year..we came home & then went with Mrs Jarvis to every store in town I returned to Dinner and had roast veal, trout, soup and Pancakes.
(Editor's note: It goes on for pages! This diary is now in the Public Archives of Canada. I wonder what he weighed?)
.....Contributed by the Editor

Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal



Members of our Vancouver and Victoria JASNA regions have had papers published in Persuasions since its inception when Joan Austen-Leigh of Victoria was the first editor. This a partial list of articles that you may find especially interesting because of their local authorship.
Compiled October 2012 by Phyllis Ferguson Bottomer

Austen-Leigh, Joan

- *My Aunt, Jane Austen* **11:28-36**
- *Forms of Address and Titles in Jane Austen* **12:35-37**
- *The Founding of JASNA* **15:7-13**
- *New Light Thrown on Jane Austen's Refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither* **8:34-36**
- *Two Queries Concerning Emma* **18:54-57**
- *Jane Austen's Favourite Nephew* **18:144-153**
- *Jane Austen: The French Connection* **20:106-118**

Austen-Leigh, Joan and Freydis Welland

- *"Our Own Particular Jane"* **25:11-18**

Bjarnason, Palma

- *"Worth Looking At": Performance Prowess in Emma's Scenes of Dance* **29:145-154**

Ferguson Bottomer, Phyllis

- *A Speech Language Pathologist Journeys to Highbury* **29:155-166.**
- *"Conversation, or rather talk": Autistic Spectrum Disorders and the Communication and Social Challenges of John Thorpe* **On-Line Vol.31, No.10**

Giardini, Anne & Carol Shields

- *Martians in Jane Austen* **18:191-203.**

Liscombe, Rhodri

- *From the Polar Seas to Australasia: Jane Austen, "English culture" and Regency Orientalism* **On-Line Vol 28, No 2**

Parker, Keiko Kimura

- *On Being a Japanese Janeite* **3:7-8**
- *A Little Query on Mr. and Mrs.* **5:11-12**
- *Illustrating Jane Austen* **11:22-27**
- *Sense and 'Non-Sense' in Eight Jane Austen Biographies* **12:24-34**
- *"What Part of Bath Do You Think They Will Settle In? Jane Austen's Use of Bath in Persuasion* **23: 166-176.**

Sturrock, June

- *Money, Morals and Mansfield Park: The West Indies Revisited* 28:176-184
- *"I am Rather a Talker": Speech and Silence in Emma* On-Line Vol.28, No.1
- *Mrs. Bennet's Legacy: Austen's Mothers in Film and Fiction* On-Line Vol.29, No.1

Sutherland, Eileen

- *Dining at the Great House: Food and Drink in the Time of Jane Austen* 12:88-98
- *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Foreign Travellers in England* 14:27-38
- *The Rise and Fall of the House of Elliot* 15:57-62
- *Tithes and the Rural Clergyman in Jane Austen's England* 16:48-54.
- *The Infamous Flannel Waistcoat* 18:58
- *"A little sea-bathing would set me up forever": History & Development of the English Seaside Resort* 19:60-76

Welland, Freydis Jane

- *The History of Jane Austen's Writing Desk* 30:125-129



Susan Olsen gave this intriguing presentation on the early career of Samuel Johnson to our meeting in June

Samuel Johnson On the road to fame....

From the start, he conceived of a Dictionary that defined each word by providing evidence of its use in the language and therefore contained references to some of the greatest examples of English literature and scientific journals.



It is the fate of those who toil at the lower employments of life to be rather driven by the fear of evil, than attracted by the prospect of good; to be exposed to censure without hope of praise, to be disgraced by miscarriage, or punished for neglect, where success would have been without applause, and diligence without reward. Among these unhappy mortals is the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the paths through which Learning and Genius press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense has been yet granted to very few.

These familiar and somewhat disparaging words are from the Preface of Dr. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and thereafter Johnson took on no further tasks as a lexicographer. It was by way of my interest in the Dictionary and its eloquent meanings and intriguing etymologies that I came to think about Samuel Johnson, the man. His dictionary project wasn't begun until he reached 36, so I wondered what aspects of Samuel Johnson's life and experience *brought* him to accept personal responsibility for this prodigious task, the likes of which has never quite been duplicated by another human being. It is this portion of his life that I have set out to explore a little.

Looking back to his beginnings, we see that it was somewhat of a miracle that Johnson survived his birth on September 18, 1709. His father, Michael, was a Lichfield bookseller in his fifties and his mother, Sarah, daughter of a landowner, was over 40. Samuel was their first child and it was reported that he was born “dead” and didn’t show signs of life for quite some minutes. We can only speculate as to how his brain might have been affected by this delay. He had a sickly childhood. As an infant he contracted scrofula (a form of tuberculosis affecting the lymph nodes) from his wet nurse. Blind in one eye and partially deaf, his body was left scarred from a bout of smallpox. In his childhood he endured several primitive operations, which must have caused great pain and suffering. At one point, his parents even took him 120 miles to London to be “touched” by the monarch, Queen Anne, as this was believed to be a way to cure childhood diseases. In spite of all, he survived, although he did not later recall his childhood with great happiness.

What follows are aspects of Johnson’s life, illustrated by several of the cogent and brilliant definitions he wrote for his dictionary (with credit to Henry Hichings for his titling idea.)

Reading: study in books; perusal of books

His educated mother taught Samuel to read, and he endured a vicious schoolmaster at the local grammar school while **reading** Latin and Greek. His home was naturally full of books. Before his birth, his father had purchased a library of 3000 volumes from the late William Stanley, Earl of Derby and Samuel had access to this vast collection in his boyhood. Perhaps because of this early experience, he once told his biographer Boswell

“A child should not be discouraged from reading anything that he takes a liking to, from a notion that it is above his reach”.

(This reminds one of the Rev. Austen’s library at Steventon and the opportunity it afforded Jane)

Another aspect of Samuel’s life was shaped by his handicaps. Although he had a large frame, his lack of sight in one eye meant he could not participate in school sports that involved balls and judging distance. Instead his physical activities were jumping, climbing and swimming, all rather solitary activities. Throughout his life he was physically active and surprisingly strong. It is interesting to know that he was still good at swimming in his fifties and when visiting Lichfield in his seventies, he was said to have searched out the rail that he used to jump over as a boy and laying aside his hat and wig, and pulling off his coat, leapt over it twice.

Conscience: the knowledge or faculty by which we judge of the goodness or wickedness of ourselves.

We see evidence of other aspects of Johnson’s personality that surfaced while only a boy and which influenced the direction his life was to take. When only nine years old (over the strong objections of his devout parents) he stopped attending church and experienced a sort of crisis of belief. Even many years later, he was reluctant to speak of this period in his life. W. Jackson Bate, in his extensive book on Johnson says that it was a kind of juvenile anticipation of Kant’s argument that “**conscience** is groundless without the existence of moral law and immortality”. This was the first obstacle that Johnson encountered in attempting a belief in immortality and Bate opines that even in these early years, Johnson’s guilt over his doubt laid the groundwork for a life of self-punishment and habitual self-prodding. Many years later, Boswell recorded Johnson’s words at the age of 64:

Sir, the only method by which religious truth can be established is by martyrdom..... I am afraid there is no other way of ascertaining the truth, but by persecution on one hand and enduring it on the other.

Mind: 1. the intelligent power 2. Liking; inclination 3. Thoughts, sentiments
 4. Opinion 5. Memory

But by the time Johnson was 16, his father’s business was failing and he was four years in arrears with his Excise taxes. The townspeople tried to stave off his fall by electing him to public office, but eventually a settlement had to be made and Johnson’s mother’s family, the Fords, came to the rescue. The agreements were signed by Cornelius Ford, the 31 year old owner of the Ford estate and he, upon meeting Samuel, was

immediately impressed by the young man's intelligence. Cornelius invited Samuel for a visit to his estate at Stourbridge and what was intended to be a week's stay, turned into nearly a year. There is no doubt that this was a mutually pleasant arrangement, as Cornelius was a well-educated man with a kind and generous nature and Samuel clearly associated his life in Lichfield with his father's depressing failures and the joyless atmosphere at the Lichfield Grammar School. Cornelius Ford (known to his friends as 'Nealy') was fascinated by Samuel's abilities and as Bate says "Cornelius would have had the perception to see that the youth's tenacious memory *transcended what is usually meant* when we speak of good memory..... [he possessed a] **mind** that, while penetrating to essentials, digests rather than discards detail".

Conversation: Familiar discourse, chat, easy talk: opposed to a formal conference

There were two positive results of Johnson's stay at Stourbridge. Firstly, he was encouraged to develop a large general knowledge, not only from knowledge in books but also by having an observant eye about life itself. Cornelius encouraged him to study the principles of everything with these words, as Johnson recalled to Boswell:

"Learn the leading Precognita [prior knowledge] of all things – no need perhaps to turn over leaf by leaf; but grasp the Trunk hard only and you will shake all the Branches".

Secondly was the early opportunity to develop his skills in the art of **conversation**. Even as a teen, Samuel's speaking impressed the society of Stourbridge. He had "readiness to get to the point, which presupposes not only something of an internal fund of knowledge already there, but openness of interest". Bates rightfully says that Johnson was to become "one of the supreme talkers of history, and conversation was the most lasting single pleasure he had".

Bookseller: He whose whole profession it is to sell books.

Bookish: given to books, acquainted only with books. (It is generally used contemptuously)

Johnson's inevitable return to Lichfield was undoubtedly depressing as he was unable to continue his education – refused at the Lichfield Grammar School due to his long absence and no resources for attending university. His father was even worse-off than his relations and friends realized. Johnson began working in his father's shop probably with the expectation that he would also become a **bookseller**. One positive aspect of this situation was that he did learn the art of bookbinding, and he much preferred this to waiting on his father's **bookish** customers! He appeared to enjoy manual tasks that focused attention towards a finished project and throughout his life, he often divided larger tasks into sections – carefully noting what was now finished and what still had to be accomplished. This was somewhat of a lifelong habit – making lists and using arithmetic to bring a sense of order to the disorganization of life.

Internal: not external

There was another aspect of Johnson that could be seen in these earliest times. After his experiences at Stourbridge, he must have been aware of his abilities and must have been frustrated as he saw others of his age going off to university. But never does he give expression to envy, and blame is not attached to the circumstances which were beyond his control. In Bate's words "his whole procedure... was to meet a thing head on, as courageously and honestly as he could, and then internalize and contain it". Johnson was a thinker from the days of his youth and his inward life brought him much turmoil. Perhaps the desire to be free of some of his **internal** turmoil inspired him to take up his pen and engage his mind.

Argument: a reason alleged for or against a thing

At the age of 18 Johnson became acquainted with Gilbert Walmesley, a successful and well-known lawyer, and many years later described him to Boswell:

“Let me indulge myself in the remembrance. I knew him very early: he was one of the first friends that literature procured me, and I hope that my gratitude made me worthy of his notice. He was of an advanced age [47], and I was only not a boy [18]; yet he never received my notions with contempt. He was a Whig, with all the virulence and malevolence of his party; yet difference of opinion did not keep us apart. I honoured him, and he endured me.”

From Walmsley, Johnson undoubtedly acquired some practice in **argument** and it presented a different aspect from the influence of Cornelius Ford, who “disliked argument and dispute, realizing how *little* they can achieve in all matters human”. From Walmsley also came Johnson’s desire to be a lawyer himself – an ambition which he revisited again much later in life, but never realized.

Commoner: A student of the 2nd rank at the University of Oxford; one that eats at the common table.

Then quite suddenly at the age of 20, Johnson was to enroll as a **commoner** (a student with no scholarship) at Oxford’s Pembroke College. A small inheritance from his mother and some promised support from a family friend made it possible. Michael Johnson had no money, but invited his son to choose books from his shop to take with him to Oxford. It was only after Johnson arrived in Oxford that the promised support disappeared and he found himself with very little to live on. He attempted to receive some new support by submitting a new Latin translation of Alexander Pope’s “Messiah” to the poet himself. But things went awry when Johnson sent a copy of the translation home and his delighted father printed and circulated it. Thus Pope had already read it by the time Johnson’s friend presented it and thus his opportunity for an advantageous review was lost. Other negative circumstances imposed themselves on Johnson’s stay at Oxford – his teacher, William Jorden, was a kindly man and Johnson recognized his admirable qualities – but he had great difficulty in admiring his scholarship. By his own accounts, Johnson was an unpredictable student – sometimes ignoring his classes altogether and sometimes showing feats of memory and understanding that astonished his tutors. During his year at Oxford, he had difficulty adapting to a routine (no doubt from his years of solitary thought and study) and was embarrassed by having so little money. Eventually he completely ran out of all resources to continue his studies.

When he realized that he would have to leave Oxford, he began a diary which reveals his distress over his situation. From his writings, we see that Johnson had a strong sense of responsibility for his own actions and rebuked himself for not rising early and working industriously. It seemed that he felt his own indolence was the cause of his mental distress and that only by focusing completely and keeping his mind occupied with the project at hand, could he hope to survive. In his first diary entry he writes “I bid farewell to sloth”; then later he makes a list of specific numbers of pages that he is to read each day. By creating this regimen, he was attempting to reduce his own growing anxiety and fear of what lay in store for him. Sometime during the first week of December, 1729 he quietly left Oxford, an event which appeared in the list he later made of the major events of his life. He left his books behind. His poem “The Young Author” was written at this time and reveals his deepest feelings about himself. In it, he resolves to never be complacent and to always follow Horace’s maxim ‘to be forewarned is to be forearmed’. In effect, his desperation had stripped away any illusions that he may have had about the world and his own importance. He was scorning his own hopes and leaving Oxford “proud to be forgot”.

Melancholy: A kind of madness in which the mind is always fixed on one object.

The next period of Johnson’s life was filled with despair and he suffered mental breakdown that didn’t really end for nearly five years. It seems the harder he tried to change his state of mind through rational thought, the more he feared that his **melancholy** indicated that insanity was overtaking him. He was punishing himself through a crippling sense of guilt. He later told Joshua Reynolds that the great business of his life was to “escape from himself”. In this he was to predict one aspect of psychoanalysis: that much of the misery of mankind comes from the inability of individuals to think well of themselves.

It was also during this lengthy time of illness that Johnson began to exhibit the embarrassing tics and compulsive mannerisms that remained with him for the rest of his life. Most definitely psycho-neurotic in origin, this condition did not help his relationships and for a time diminished his chance of gainful employment. It was indeed a bleak time. But friends who believed in him, such as Edmund Hector, refused to abandon him and provided much needed accommodations and connections to employment. As one would imagine, it was writing that eventually brought Johnson back from his deeply depressed state. A sign that he was recovering was the fact that he wrote to a friend and asked him to send his library of books that he had left behind at Oxford five years earlier.

Marriageable: Fit for wedlock: of an age to be married

Within a year a major change happened in Johnson's life - and so began a sort of second life. He married Elizabeth Jervis Porter, the widow of his acquaintance Harry Porter. She was over 20 years older than Johnson and hardly anyone from either of their families thought her **marriageable** or that the match was a good idea. There was never any evidence to suggest that Johnson intentionally married her for her money - although she did have a considerable inheritance. Her relatives certainly wondered what she saw in him, but she was not to be discouraged. Lucy Porter, Elizabeth's 18 year old daughter, told Boswell that,

“when he was first introduced to her mother, his appearance was very forbidding: he was then lean and lank, so that his immense structure of bones was hideously striking to the eye, and the scars of scrofula were deeply visible. He also wore his hair, which was straight and stiff, separated behind: and he often had, seemingly, convulsive starts and odd gesticulations, which tended to bring at once surprize and ridicule. But Mrs. Porter was ‘so much engaged by his conversation that she overlooked all these disadvantages’ and told her daughter ‘This is the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life’ ”.

W. Jackson Bate thinks that “so comforting did the widow find his reassurance, both before and after Mr. Porter's death, that she unquestionably encouraged Johnson in the months of courtship that followed; and Johnson, with his pent-up need for affection and his capacity for gratitude, responded warmly to her own need for help and her confidence in him.” Undoubtedly Elizabeth (or Tetty, as Johnson called her) gave up a great deal to marry Johnson. Her sons rejected her and as it turned out, her fortune was mostly taken by the unsuccessful attempt at establishing a school at Edial Hall. It opened in the fall of 1735, but only had three pupils (that friends had supplied). Johnson failed to secure another position as a teacher and, feeling very responsible for losing a large portion of Tetty's inheritance, he decided to go to London where he might get some work as a writer for journals and, most importantly, *use no more* of Tetty's money. He travelled to London with David Garrick, who had been one of his three pupils at the failed school, and who was now planning to study law at Rochester. (*Little did they know that Garrick was set to become one of the most famous London stage actors of his generation.*)

Johnson was excited to be in London and saw it as a place of opportunities that were unavailable in the countryside. Many years later he was to tell Boswell:

“The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it. I will venture to say, there is more learning and science within the circumference of ten miles from where we now sit, than in all the rest of the world.”

But when he arrived, he had almost nothing to live on, and was determined to send what little he earned back to Tetty. He was at first convinced that by completing his first tragic drama *Irene* he would achieve literary fame. But though the play was eventually completed, it was not taken up. In 1737, he brought Tetty to London and dove into the only profession that he knew. In fact, the first published “success” Johnson had was a poem in the “imitative” style made popular by Alexander Pope. This 263 line poem, entitled *London*, is a satire on the corruption and squalor of life in London. It was a conscious imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal and it contains the famous couplet:

This mournful truth is ev'ry where confess'd, SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D.
Johnson reportedly gave all of the considerable proceeds to his wife.

Gentleman: a man raised above the vulgar by his character or post

At this time, Johnson also began his formal association with Edward Cave, a self-style **gentleman** and the self-made editor of *Gentleman's Magazine*. Johnson was mainly assisting with the "Reports from Parliament"; but not long after he began this, the British Parliament decided that it was a "breach of privilege" to publish reports of the debates and banned the practice. It was probably Johnson who suggested to Edward Cave that the reports be written using, as a setting, the "Voyage to Lilliput" from Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels". By renaming the Parliamentarians with amusing names and using Lilliput as the location, the events could be reported without detection. This exposure to the political world afforded Johnson a practical knowledge of the workings of the government and laid the groundwork for many of the conversations and opinions that Johnson shared in years to come. Living like an adult waif, Johnson gave almost all that he earned to his wife, still feeling the guilt of responsibility for what he had brought upon her. She was now past 50 and the move to London had a negative impact on her life and health, cutting her off from friends and familiar places. She took to drink and opium and, in spite of her husband's efforts, had spent all that she had and all that he gave her. Johnson's unsuccessful application for a teaching job at this time, again brought back the memories of Oxford and his interrupted pursuit of credentials that would have afforded him a better financial life. This was the time of his growing reputation for wearing bedraggled clothing and developing uncouth eating habits, by which he was somewhat identified for the rest of his life.

Anonymous: wanting a name

But, through necessity, this period in London was one of the more productive intervals of Johnson's life -- where his only option was to become a journalist or hack writer. The pay was low, the topics were not chosen by the writer and were often of a trivial nature. The hack writer could not expect his career to advance, it was simply a hand-to-mouth existence. To quote Bate -- "The journalistic writings of Johnson, first for Cave and later for other publishers, were so numerous, so various and scattered in such a multiplicity of unconnected publications, that it was doubtful whether Johnson himself in later years could have made a complete list". As was the custom, almost everything he wrote was published as **anonymous** and it is difficult to say whether he preferred this or not. Well into the 20th century, scholars were still finding samples of Johnson's work during this period and this certainly shows how hard he worked to produce an income, in spite of his own confessions of idleness. Here is a comment made in one of his later Rambler (106) essays that perhaps sheds light on his desire for anonymity:

"No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes, than a public library; for who can see the wall crowded on every side by mighty volumes, the works of laborious meditation and accurate inquiry, now scarcely known but by the catalogue?"

Grubstreet: originally the name of a street in Moorfields, in London; a place much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries and temporary poems, whence any mean production is called grubstreet

The speed with which Johnson wrote, once inspired, was astonishing. During this time in London, he gained an intimate knowledge of publishing, periodicals, reviewing, editing and printing and was probably the only major writer who was so well informed about the 'underworld' of writing, dubbed **grubsteet**. Here Johnson roamed freely and felt comfortable in his tattered clothing. He experienced true poverty first hand and got to know the people of this world. He met characters who impressed him with their acceptance and ingenuity, and for the rest of his life, he was known to be genuinely interested in people who were acquainted with hardship and poverty.

Biographer: a writer of lives; a relator not of the history of nations, but of the actions of particular persons

“Life of Savage” (a biography of Johnson’s friend, Richard Savage) was also published anonymously but was popular and brought Johnson some much needed income as a **biographer**. To many, Richard Savage was a scoundrel and he had many enemies, but Johnson was fascinated by him:

“it is dangerous to trust him, because he considered himself as discharged, (by the first quarrel) from all ties of honour or gratitude”

This book remains today as a masterpiece of biography. Johnson wrote it very rapidly (apparently in a matter of a few days) and the words naturally flowed from a personal knowledge of his friend’s life. What he created was basically a new form – critical biography – which gave the reader a view of the subject’s actions in the context of human life, rather than just a chronological listing of events. Johnson used his variety of life experiences and observations about human nature in much the same way when he came to write his moral essays many years later. And we should note that he was very much in favour of Boswell’s biography of his own life – but with the stipulation that what Boswell wrote should be “the truth”.

Famed: renowned; celebrated; much talked of

This period of varied and sporadic activity was crowned by the offer to write an English dictionary. By now, Johnson’s hopes of having a legal career were forsaken and he had few alternatives for putting his life on solid financial ground. He was now approaching the middle years of his life and was beginning to question what his life’s accomplishments had been and what his future held. The Dictionary served as a hope of being **famed** and having some freedom from debt. Johnson’s infamous estimate of three years to completion was off the mark, but his concept for creating the Dictionary was spot on. It was based on his early experiences back at Stourbridge when Cornelius Ford had encouraged him to be knowledgeable in every branch of learning. He now had the project with which to show his understanding of this Renaissance ideal. From the start, he conceived of a Dictionary that defined each word by providing evidence of its use in the language and therefore contained references to some of the greatest examples of English literature and scientific journals. The Dictionary also represented something else to Johnson, something that had been lacking from his life ever since he left Oxford – recognition as a scholar. He had made several attempts in his life to have his achievements and experience take the place of an academic degree, but had been unsuccessful. This was a project that would bring him recognition and the fame he had craved for so many years.

Prodigious: amazing; astonishing; such as may be seen a prodigy; portentous, enormous, monstrous, amazingly great

It was a task of Herculean proportions and Samuel Johnson, in full knowledge of what he was doing, took on this **prodigious** task. Johnson was to be paid £1575 for his work and by signing the contract with Robert Dodsley in 1746 he set in motion one of the most ambitious literary projects ever undertaken by an individual. He must have had misgivings as he was well aware of his own weaknesses – his tendency to bouts of indolence, his overwhelming desire to get work over with as soon as possible, and the marked absence of libraries of catalogued texts that could be consulted. However, years later when Boswell suggested he took on the task without knowing what he was undertaking, Johnson answered

“I knew very well what I was undertaking, and very well how to do it, and have done it very well.”

It would be incorrect to suppose that Samuel Johnson laboured solely over the Dictionary during the nearly 9 years it took to complete it. He continued his life as a journalist because he still had a wife to support for most of these years and the money from the Dictionary was used primarily for the employment of the six amanuenses, who worked in relative obscurity, and certainly for a temperamental and exacting employer. But on this project Johnson’s habits of using lists and breaking larger tasks into smaller parts was exactly suited. With his six helpers following his directions he provided the words and sought out the references – then they

carried out the organized plan as he had envisioned it. There were many delays and changes of plans along the way. Even though it took many years to complete, his desire to have it done was heightened by the appearance each day of his paid workers who most likely helped to keep him going when his tendency might have been to give up. In 1752 after years of bedridden illness, Johnson's wife died. Johnson was grief stricken and melancholy seized him - the "blackest and deepest kind". For years to come, Johnson's diaries record his grief and his prayers for her. She had been, after all, the reason for his revival from his depressed years after leaving Oxford. She made him feel needed. Supplying her needs had been his motivation for so much of the work he did. He denied himself so that she would not suffer as much. Dressing like a beggar was perhaps a way that he tried to soothe his guilt, and after her death he was unable to retain a house unless it was filled with the needy.

Mirth: Merriment; jollity; gaiety; laughter

No comments on Samuel Johnson would be complete without a reference to his wit. He himself said:

"the size of a man's understanding might always be justly measured by his **mirth**",

"love is the wisdom of the fool and the folly of the wise",

"I hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am", and

"to keep your secret is wisdom, but to expect others to keep it is folly".

Mrs. Thrale wrote of him "No man loved laughing any better, and his vein of humour was rich and apparently inexhaustible".

Finally: ultimately; lastly; in conclusion.

One might say that the Dictionary (and the way in which the task of creating it was approached) opened the door to Johnson's destiny -- that of leaving an indelible mark on English literature. In Aug 1750, still several years before the Dictionary was completed, the following appeared in the *Rambler* (No. 43). Perhaps it offers a glimpse into his assessment of this important undertaking.

All the performances of human art, at which we look with praise or wonder, are instances of the resistless force of perseverance; it is by this that the quarry becomes the pyramid, and that distant countries are united with canals. If a man was to compare the effect of a single stroke of a pick-axe, or of one impression of the spade, with the general design and last result, he would be overwhelmed by the sense of their disproportion; yet these petty operations, incessantly continued, in time surmount the greatest difficulties, and mountains are levelled, the oceans bounded, by the slender force of human beings.

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(Note: Jackie Johnson has informed us about a book she has recently enjoyed, "Wit and Wives" by Kate Chisholm (Chatto and Windus, 2012) It is about Johnson's women.)

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Mail to the **Editor**: Sandy Lundy, Ste. 803, 4620 West 10th Avenue,

Vancouver BC V6R 2J5 (604-228-1944)

or email to the **Production Coordinator**: Susan Olsen, olsen@telus.net

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