

Muse & Musings

"The company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation"

A turn-up in a million:

Samuel Johnson and the Improbability of Genius

(with a digression on Ernest Bevin)

By Sandy Lundy

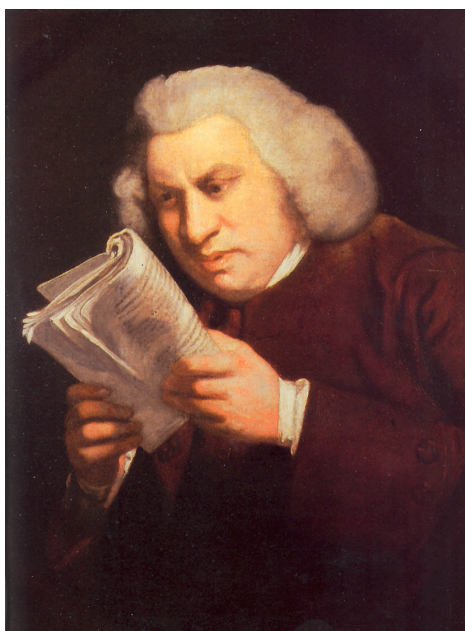
This is an edited version of an essay written a few years ago as part of the SFU 55+ course, "Words, Love and Loneliness: the Public and Private World of Samuel Johnson." The course gave the student an introduction to the wild and wacky 18th century world of Samuel Johnson and his contemporaries. It also provided the student with the opportunity to begin to nibble around the edges of the 225-year-old literary industry known as Johnsonian studies. Winston Churchill once remarked that the English value the law, literature, and tolerance, so I attempted to put my comments on Johnson into that context, and began with the notion of tolerance.

Johnson certainly tested the tolerance of his contemporaries. Much has been made of his scarred appearance, hearing and visual impairments, and his behavior which was affected by neurological or psychological illness or possibly both. Peter Quennell says, "[Johnson's] appearance was so alarming that those who encountered him for the first time were invariably somewhat astonished, and often shaken and appalled."¹ And this was in an era when people were accustomed to physical disfigurement. One thinks of the Earl of Elgin, who had the misfortune to lose his nose and had to wear a metal prosthesis. Everywhere in the 18th century people saw the scars of smallpox, various tubercular diseases, terrible skin infections, the effects of rickets and tapeworms and a host of other diseases the natural history of which fills the Biomedical Library.

Then there were Johnson's manners. C.E. Vulliamy says, "People who sat near him at the table were shocked and embarrassed by his violent procedure, and they were often

nauseated by their proximity to his dirty clothes... he would occasionally thrust his trembling fingers into the plate... swill wine with much dribbling or choking and masticate as the veins of his forehead rose in hideous corrugation."²

And again, this was an era when people used cosmetics, even wax, to cover the scars if they could, and wore the most gorgeous clothes they could afford, silks, satins, velvet, lace and all the textiles of glorious raiment. To carry off these clothes they moved and stood with graceful posture, and a veneer of exquisite manners and formalities was the hallmark of society.



Samuel Johnson, c. 1772, by Sir Joshua Reynolds

Perhaps it is reasonable to suggest that Johnson was tolerated as the ultimate English eccentric, a recognizable type through the centuries. When I was living in London in the 1960s, there was a serious (well, serio-comic) debate going on in the newspapers as to whether the English eccentric was a dying breed. In our office we certainly agreed there were lots of them about. Yet Johnson was tolerated, but possibly largely by "those who [according to Vulliamy] were adequately sustained by their admiration of his genius." Further on, Vulliamy says, "Johnson was a talker, a ponderous athlete in conversation," and this was perhaps his appeal to his friends in his clubs who would sit up with him through the night to talk, laugh, debate and match wits. Perhaps Johnson can be described

as a great verbal athlete, but he certainly was not a guest in the luxurious homes of Mayfair, and it was "only in later life that he caught an occasional glimpse of aristocratic splendor in the salons of Mrs. Vesey or Mrs. Montague."³

Long before this, however, in 1737, at the age of 28, Johnson left his home town of Lichfield in Staffordshire to go to London to earn his living by his pen. This was ten years of ill-paid prodigious output of poetry, newspaper articles, essays, editing, reporting of parliamentary debates and much else. His reputation grew with his

erudition and mastery of the language, and in 1746 he was approached by a group of London publishers and booksellers to produce a badly needed dictionary of the English language. This is perhaps the greatest achievement for which he is personally known today. It is said that his contribution was to stabilize the language. In *Dictionary Johnson*, James Clifford describes his working methods – and God knows, this is an object lesson on what the disabled can accomplish.



King George III; Johnson's friend and biographer James Boswell. Both portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Of course, the project took much longer than the originally envisioned three years, and the dictionary did not appear until 1755. Johnson had clerks, most of them highly-efficient (and probably long-suffering) Scots, which is pretty funny given his contempt for the Scottish, but the intellectual achievement of the enterprise is his. He accomplished, say the English, what 40 French academicians could not accomplish in 40 years. The two volumes which appeared in 1755 contained 40,000 words, illustrated with 116,000 quotations from his collection of twice that many. Although he did not classify pronunciation because he could find no agreement, his methods are used by modern lexicographers, and he is the only person to stamp his dictionary with his own personality. Clifford says:

When modern scholars attempt to evaluate Johnson's overall achievement they make clear that there was little new or original in his approach except his choice of quotations for moral purposes. His work was merely the culmination of a long tradition. Earlier lexicographers on the Continent and in England had experimented with every device he used. Yet if he made no discoveries, Johnson was the first in England to combine in one reliable work the various functions we now demand of a dictionary.⁴

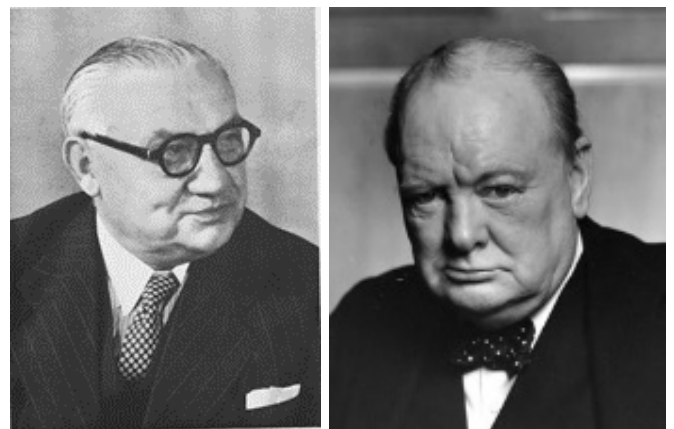
A large part of the pleasure in studying the life of Johnson is the flashes of wit and humour one is continually encountering. For instance, "in his prefatory Grammar Johnson points out that the letter "H" seldom, perhaps

never, begins any but the first syllable in which it is always sounded with a full breath, except in heir, herb, hostler, honour, humble, honest, humour and their derivatives."⁵ Elsewhere, he advises us, "Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

One of the paradoxes of studying Johnson is that, in spite of his physical afflictions and well-documented psychological depressions, from an early age he held his own intellectual gifts in high esteem. Improbable as it seems, by his optimism and physical strength, and with destitution snapping at his heels, he accomplished a prodigious work load. Prior to the publication of the Dictionary, I suspect his companionship and work would have been known to a relatively small circle, but eventually, in 1762, the worth of his contribution to the country was recognized, and the crown awarded him an annual pension of £300. In a little episode which Christopher Hibbert relates, King George III sought out and complimented Johnson during a kindly conversation in 1767.⁶

It is well-known that the English are steeped in snobbishness, and either individually or collectively, can get into a state of the neurotic fidgets over some trivia they perceive as "not quite the thing," such as (heaven forbid) a man wearing a black instead of a white waistcoat with a tailcoat. Yet, on occasion, they do have the sense to recognize and reward greatness when it comes among them.

The recognition given to Johnson induces me to introduce another Englishman: the late great labour leader, wartime minister and foreign secretary Ernest Bevin, who died aged 70 in 1951. This is the man who described the rise of his own improbable career as "a turn up in a million" and whose immense ability, and belief in his own ability, was rewarded with responsibility and high office.



Ernest Bevin and Winston Churchill

When Bevin died, *The Times* wrote in a leading article, "Like Mr. Churchill, he seemed a visitor from the 18th

century; he was of the company of Chatham and Samuel Johnson. His place, one felt, was among big men, men of strong hearts and strong opinions.”⁷

Allan Bullock, in his biography of Bevin, says, “... his life had begun as inauspiciously as that of any man who has played a comparable part in British history. He was born in 1881 in a remote Somerset village. Illegitimate, and brought up in real poverty, he lost his mother when he was eight, and left school when he was 11. At 13 he went to Bristol ... to work as a carter... The turning point in his career [occurred] in 1910 when a strike in the Bristol docks involved the carters.”⁸ By 1939 he was general secretary of the Trade Union Council. He became Minister of Labour in Churchill’s wartime coalition cabinet and Foreign Secretary in Atlee’s Labour government.

Lord Bullock relates that Bevin was “one of that small number of men in each generation about whom anecdotes collect... he was seen as a ‘character’ who embodied some of the historic characteristics which Englishmen like to recognize in themselves. In Bevin’s case...he was unashamedly himself on all occasions [and] entirely without class-consciousness.”

As a matter of fact, Ernest Bevin was a great favourite with King George VI. Like Johnson, Bevin had a capacious memory, and could summon up obscure facts to support his arguments. Sometimes the King would say, “Now, Mr. Bevin, how do you know a thing like that?” And the Minister would reply, to the King’s delight, “all gathered in the ‘edgerows of hexperience, Your Majesty.” The King and he would compare their sufferings at the hands of their doctors, and Bevin introduced his physician, Sir Alexander McCall, thusly: “This is Alec. ‘E treats me be’ind like a dartboard.”

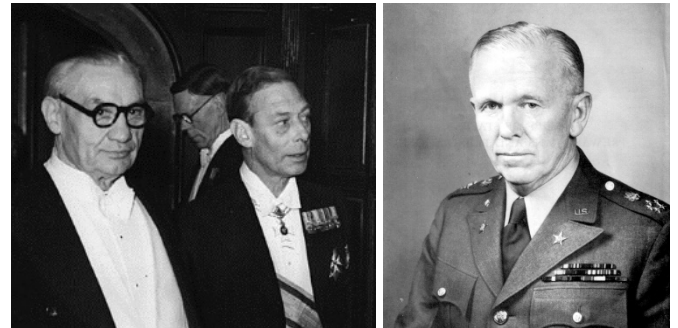


Johnson’s friend Mrs. Thrale with her daughter by Reynolds

I would like to draw another parallel between Johnson and Ernest Bevin, in the realm of friendship. It is well known that Johnson and James Boswell were warm friends, and this resulted in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. In life they would have been seen as “The Odd Couple”, but

Boswell’s works are considered a significant contribution to history and literature, not forgetting the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. The critics give him that credit, but the biographers’ accounts make him appear a despicable character.

This theme of friendship has many aspects. The wealthy brewer Henry Thrale and his wife Hester first met Johnson in 1765. One day in 1766 they called on Johnson to find him desperately ill with anxiety, and invited him to their beautiful estate at Streatham. This seems to have been a gesture of pure kindness which led to one of Johnson’s most important late-life friendships, and had reciprocal advantages. Henry Thrale being a dull dog, and his wife probably bored stiff, Johnson’s friends such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick and Oliver Goldsmith went out to visit, and a literary circle met in Mrs. Thrale’s drawing room. Johnson at this time had night terrors and feared for his sanity, and Mrs. Thrale would sit up drinking tea with him, which must have been exhausting.



Ernest Bevin with George VI; Bevin’s ally General Marshall of the Marshall Plan

On the other hand, when Henry made potentially disastrous mistakes in his business, Mrs. Thrale was able to salvage the situation, and Johnson supported her through it. When Henry sank and died under the weight of depression, gluttony and drunkenness, Johnson was one of the executors of his will, and the brewery was sold to the advantage of Mrs. Thrale and the other heirs. Hester was then free to remarry, which she did, at which point Johnson expressed a fury of indignation, and that was pretty much the end of that. She wrote a memoir of him, all the same.

Since I have linked the life of Johnson with the 20th century life of Ernest Bevin, I will mention a friendship of this more recent era which I think one of the most important in history. That connection was formed through the military, political, economic, and ultimately diplomatic bonds between Bevin and General and Secretary of State George Catlett Marshall. Britain and the U.S. being allies in World War II, they as individuals played their part in the victory and post-war reconstruction. Trust and regard being established between them, Bevin had been

notified in advance of Secretary Marshall's speech introducing the Marshall Plan, and Bevin recognized its value instantly. Certainly in my limited reading I have not encountered any 18th century man with the reserve and discipline of General Marshall, but his cooperation with an Englishman whose reputation transcends class barriers and the centuries helped usher in an era of great prosperity. Wealth and worthy ideas seem a good combination.



Jon Stewart and John Oliver on the Daily Show

Samuel Johnson had been a parliamentary reporter, but in 1738 the government forbade the reporting of its debates. Johnson thereupon wrote them up as fiction, and over the next three years penned half a million words from the *Senate of Lilliput*. I contend that his modern successors are Jon Stewart, former host of *The Daily Show*, and British comedian John Oliver, who has now taken over as most popular news satirist with *Last Week Tonight*. These and other shows continue the tradition of Johnson's satirical brilliance.

Notes:

1. Peter Quennell, *Samuel Johnson: His Friends and Enemies*, 1972, p. 23
2. C.E. Vulliamy, *Mrs. Thrale of Streatham*, 1936, p. 57
3. *Ibid*, p. 26
4. James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson*, 1979, p. 145
5. *Ibid*, p. 143
6. Christopher Hibbert, *The Personal History of Samuel Johnson*, 1971, p. 187-8
7. Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin Foreign Secretary*, Vol. 3 of the biography, 1983, p. 856
8. *Ibid*, Epilogue.
9. Hesketh Pearson, *Johnson and Boswell: The Story of Their Lives*, 1958, p. 153

Additional reading included the Preface to the Dictionary in the *Norton Anthology*, 2006.

Sandy Lundy, who has been a member of JASNA since 1993, would like to visit the 18th century, but she wouldn't want to live there. Sandy, with Susan Olsen, was co-editor of the Newsletter from 2010 to 2014. Susan's article "Samuel Johnson: On the road to fame . . ." appeared in issue #117 of the Newsletter.

March 12th Meeting

Dr. Miranda Burgess: Jane Austen on Paper

Who knew that paper could be such an interesting topic and tied in with politics, economics, and social movements? A studied and insightful analysis of Jane Austen's references to paper in her novels as well as the social and economic implications of the use of paper during this period was presented by the very entertaining and lively Miranda Burgess. A few tidbits:

- Paper was often a shorthand for plenty, scarcity, and admirable thrift.
- In *Pride and Prejudice* Caroline Bingley writes to Jane with very expensive and impractical "hot-pressed paper."
- Hot-pressed paper: paper was sized by dipping it into warm gelatin. This gave the paper a gloss and enabled ink to remain on its surface.



- Darcy's famous letter to Elizabeth is an envelope and two sheets of paper in a "very close hand," indicating luxury, but not waste.

— from notes by Lorraine Meltzer

April 16: Jane Austen Day

Regency Fashions and Libraries

Our morning speaker for Jane Austen Day was JASNA President Claire Bellanti, whose presentation "You can get a Parasol at Whitby's" told us all about circulating libraries in Jane Austen's time.



Claire Bellanti; and Ivan Sayers with one of his gowns.

In the afternoon, we heard from the delightful Ivan Sayers, Vancouver's famous fashion historian and one of this city's most in-demand speakers. His witty and informative lecture took us behind scenes, beginning in the years prior to the Regency of Jane Austen, and right up through the 1820s.

— from notes by Joan Reynolds

May 14th meeting

A visitor from New Zealand

Ruth Williamson, the founder of the Jane Austen Society of New Zealand, spoke at our May meeting. She presented a fascinating talk on Robert William (R.W.) Chapman, scholar and famed Austen editor.



Ruth Williamson and R.W. Chapman

Notable quote

This quotation is from the excellent book *Moon Tiger*, for which Penelope Lively was awarded the Booker Prize:

Moments shower away; the days of our lives vanish utterly, more insubstantial than if they had been invented. Fiction can seem more enduring than reality. Pierre on the field of battle, the Bennet girls at their sewing, Tess on the threshing machine – all these are nailed down for ever, on the page and in a million heads.

– submitted by Phyllis Ferguson Bottomer

June 18th meeting

Books & Berries

The following books were reviewed by members:

- Bonnie Herron reviewed *Jane Austen Sings the Blues* – a memorial book honouring the late Bruce Stovel, esteemed Austen scholar.
- Sandy Lundy reviewed *Indigo: From Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans* by Jenny Balfour Paul.
- Elizabeth Walker reviewed *The Bronte Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* by Deborah Lutz.
- Lorraine Meltzer reviewed *Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor* by Stephanie Barron.
- Irene Howard reviewed *Voices from the World of Jane Austen* by Malcolm Day.
- Aileen Hollifield reviewed *Miss Jane Austen's Guide to Modern Life's Dilemmas* by Rebecca Smith.
- Barbara Phillips reviewed *Fierce Convictions: The extraordinary life of Hannah More* by Karen Swallow Prior.

In addition to the book reviews, the June meeting was notable for the draw for Jane's Bountiful Basket, won by

new member Violet Hayes and presented by Aileen Hollifield.



Aileen (left) and Violet

See News and Notes

For more notes and pictures on most of the meetings see our website:

[News & Notes](#)

We thank Lauren McMahon for her wonderful work on the website. If you look at the website, you will see that a lot of this newsletter originated there.

Bring old unwanted books

Silent Auction ideas, donations welcome

In recent years, members have sometimes forgotten to bring books our annual "Books & Berries" meeting in June. We are now encouraging members to bring unwanted books to any and all meetings to be saved up for the June sale.



As our Silent Auction was so successful, we would like to repeat it in future Decembers. Please think hard and consult your business contacts for donation ideas.

Mark your calendar

Fall meeting dates are:

- September 24
- October 15
- November 19
- December 10

For more details see the program of events on our website:

[JASNA-Vancouver program](#)

Editor's challenge

Sir Joshua Reynolds



Going through Sandy Lundy's entertaining article on Samuel Johnson, the editor while diligently scouring the web for pictures to accompany the text, began to notice (and then deliberately reinforce) a trend: all the portraits from Johnson's era

were by Sir Joshua Reynolds. **The Challenge:** the Editor would be most pleased if a member were moved to write an article on this artist.

— by *Elspeth Flood*

Regional Coordinator's Corner

"What dreadful hot weather we have! It keeps one in a continual state of inelegance." — *Letter to Cassandra, September 18, 1796*

I hope that you find your way to keep elegant through bouts of hot weather in Vancouver. It is to be fondly recalled when the rains of winter fall.



RC Siu Michelle narrating the opening of P&P, accompanied by our own Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Lindsay and Phyllis Bottomer.

Our little group is now on hiatus for the summer, but we were invited to co-present a Pemberley Garden Party hosted by University Women's Club at Hycroft. A beautiful sunny Sunday afternoon served to illuminate the gorgeous grounds surrounding the spacious patio. Over 70 attendees perused our materials, Austen-related books

and replica quilt. After a quick reading from P&P and an introduction of our JASNA regional group by yours truly, we listened to a presentation by Miranda Burgess, English associate professor at UBC.

This fall the theme of the AGM is "Emma at 200: No One but Herself" and so in September we will celebrate the story of the residents of Highbury with a group discussion. And ask our own Keiko Parker a few questions about translating Mr. Elton's charade in her Japanese translation of *Emma*. We also look forward in October to having Herbert Rosengarten, UBC professor emeritus.

Our December celebration of Jane's birthday will feature a silent auction. Funds raised will help support our activities so donations to the auction are welcome. Please contact me or one of our programming committee members to receive your donation.

We are looking for volunteers

Our programming committee is looking for new volunteers. The committee meets only twice a year, and works together to put on our meetings. All skills and enthusiasm are welcome! Make a phone call to book a presenter, or provide an idea for a group activity. Our group is all the better for any kind of help you can offer.

Our audio-visual equipment is very simple to run. If you can operate your computer at home, this will be a breeze. No previous knowledge necessary. Volunteers provided with an orientation and help at meetings. I'd like to have a few volunteers to help share the task so that it's not left to just one or two persons. Please see me at meetings and let me know you'd be willing to help!

I welcome suggestions and feedback from members at meetings, or by email:

jasnavancouverRC@gmail.com

This Newsletter, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, is distributed to members by email and posted on our website. Members who so request may receive a hard copy either at a meeting or in the mail. All submissions and book reviews on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome.

The Editor acknowledges a great debt of gratitude to Laureen McMahon, Joan Reynolds and Lorraine Meltzer.

Email: elspeth.n.flood@gmail.com Or mail: Elspeth Flood
#501 – 1520 Harwood Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6G 1X9

JASNA Vancouver website: www.jasnavancouver.ca