

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# James Boswell

For many years Boswell's fame rested on his biography of Samuel Johnson, which was considered one of the greatest biographies in English. He had known Johnson well for nearly three decades, traveled with him, and recorded his brilliant conversation so faithfully that Johnson seemed to come alive on every page. Yet because of the biography's greatness, a kind of counter-image of Boswell developed as only a recorder of Johnson and not a great writer himself. At worst, he was satirized as a young toady who played up to Johnson, flattering him and sometimes maneuvering him into situations which Boswell could then exploit.

This all changed in 1950 with the publication of Boswell's *London Journal*. It and many more of his own journals and papers had been found in the 1920s in Malahide Castle in Ireland, but were known only, in parts, to a tiny group of scholars. (The full story of their recovery can be read in the introductions to the Yale University Press edition.) In it Boswell emerges in his own right. He is twenty-two years old, bright, ambitious, and delighted to have left his home in Edinburgh and be on his own in London, with a "small allowance" from his father and time to go to plays, study and write, pursue women, and meet the city's literary and social elite. It was an opportunity many young men dream of.

This is only half of what makes the *Journal* so interesting, however. Boswell was also a highly self-conscious modern man who was very aware of his social image. He often refers to "Mr. Addison," the author of *The Spectator*, the very popular magazine that was then the guide to London culture, manners, and morals, on whom he is trying to model himself. He is very self-critical. He is pleased when he is both a good speaker and good listener; he is displeased when he and his friends "were very genteel and very dull" (p. 49). He tries out different "diversions" and carefully records his reactions.

About all of this he is painfully honest. He records both his shame and his smugness in his encounters with London's prostitutes. He dramatically describes his progress in seducing Louisa, the actress he has chosen as his potential mistress; then describes his dreary months recovering from gonorrhea. He also records his slow realization that he does not really want to become an officer in the Guards, the aristocratic military unit he had come to London wanting to join.

But the *Journal* is more than just the honest record of these experiences and lessons. It is an essential agent. As he writes at one point, he wants it to "contain a consistent picture of a young fellow eagerly pushing through life." (p. 206) He lives an active, self-conscious life not just for its own sake but also to have it to write about and so make an interesting *Journal*. When his life has been dull, he laments that the *Journal* is dull. When it has been sophisticated and engaging, he is both pleased with himself and with the *Journal*.

The climax of these themes comes with his meeting Samuel Johnson. By 1763 Johnson was the most famous of London's men of letters: a literary critic, a biographer, a journalist, and the author-editor of the first great dictionary of the English language. No one, not even David Garrick the actor and theater owner-manager or the novelist-poet Oliver Goldsmith, both of whom Boswell had also met and befriended, had so much stature. Yet Johnson took to this young unknown Scot like a father to a son, and Boswell took to Johnson as a new father. They would not meet again until 1766. But from then on the qualities he had developed so conscientiously as an autobiographer – his skill in conversation, his self-consciousness, his skill as a writer and as a listener, even his skill at "nettling people"—would make him Johnson's great biographer.

### Questions for Further Study:

1. In what ways did Johnson become a father figure for the young Boswell?
2. To whom, besides himself, do you think Boswell wrote, intentionally and unintentionally?
3. To what extent do you think Boswell tried to shape or structure his *Journal*? What effects was he seeking?

4. Compare Boswell as man and writer with Bunyan and Pepys.