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**DOERR DALLAS
VALUATIONS**

My Favourite...

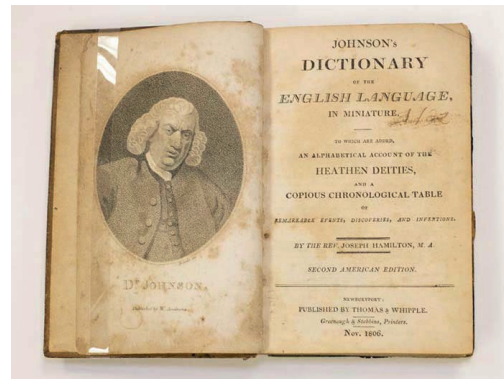
Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language

It is 265 years since Samuel Johnson's 2-volume Dictionary of the English Language was published on 15 April 1755. Though many forms of reprint are available, to own a copy of the first edition would be the best of all options. Completing the Dictionary from A to Z was solely Johnson's responsibility. As his preface points out, it had taken whole teams of academicians to produce dictionaries of Italian and French, whereas he worked in the solitude of his garret at 17 Gough Square, supported only by a succession of feckless and rather drunken copyists — five out of the six were not English but Scottish.

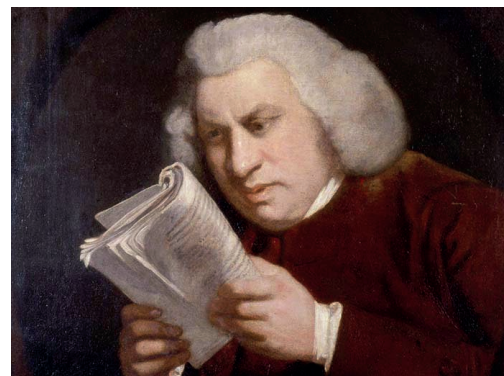
One has to admire the Dictionary as a book which received no academic support, compiled "not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academick bowers" but in London "amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow". Johnson's contract was with a group of influential London booksellers including Robert Dodsley and Andrew Millar. Although he had agreed with them to finish the work in three years, the first volume was not completed for seven. The whole task took nine years altogether. Far from thinking himself a national celebrity, Johnson felt reduced to "a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words" (the Dictionary's definition of lexicographer). When his wife Tetty died early in 1752, his morale must have hit rock bottom.

Johnson's brilliant handling of illustrative quotation means that his lexicon can also be enjoyed as a unique form of anthology. Though quotations from 18th-century sources, particularly Pope, Swift and Thomson, occur with some regularity, Johnson's highest regard was for writers from before the Restoration whose works were "the wells of English undefiled". Many recently introduced words, particularly anything "Gallick", are condemned as "cant" or "low". Giving such frank expression as it does to the author's tastes and personal prejudices is what makes the Dictionary so endlessly fascinating.

Most impressive of all is Johnson's battle with his own indolence or what his Dictionary termed "the repugnance which we naturally have to labour". His publishers became exasperated by the years of procrastination. Boswell recorded Andrew Millar's oath, on receiving the last sheet of copy from Johnson's messenger: "Thank God I have done with him". On returning the messenger duly passed on Millar's words to Johnson who replied: "I am glad that he thanks God for any thing".



The Samuel Johnson Dictionary, 1806 edition



Dr. Samuel Johnson

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