Nicholas Cambridge had raised a considerable sum of money for an
important cause and attracted a good deal of publicity for the Ter-
centenary.

The next major London event in the celebrations was the dinner
at the House of Lords on 14 May. The Palace of Westminster is a
familiar sight, but for many of those who attended it was their first
time inside. To be on the site of so much history is to experience a
frisson of excitement. It was within these walls that Charles I was
sentenced to death by the regicides; Fanny Burney watched the
trial of Warren Hastings; Lord Mansfield handed down the
Somerset judgment; Winston Churchill proclaimed “we shall fight
on the beaches”; and Sir Peter Viggers claimed £1,645 for the
purchase of a duck house on expenses.

On a grey evening, eighty Johnsonians, including a contingent
who had journeyed from Lichfield (this time, by minibus), gathered
by the Thames. Entering by the intriguingly-named Black Rod’s
Garden Entrance, the menacing-looking bunch were greeted by
airport-style security, with not a drawn sword in sight.

The guests gathered for drinks on the famous terrace by the
river, admiring the view south across Westminster Bridge to the
London Eye and beyond, before taking their places for dinner in
what was essentially an upmarket marquee. The grace was said by
Lord Harries, former Bishop of Oxford, and a welcome was given by
the host, Lord Young of Norwood Green. The fare was thoroughly
Johnsonian: gratin of oxtail and shin of English beef topped with a
sweet potato purée served with a farandole of spring baby vegeta-
bles and a must wine charcutière sauce.

After the dinner and the Loyal Toast (would Johnson have drunk
it?) came the speeches. The first was by Lord Kenneth Baker, Sec-
retary of State for Education under Margaret Thatcher and author
of several books, including George III: A Life in Caricature. His
subject was, “Why should we celebrate the life of Samuel Johnson?”
An old hand at public speaking, his address was entertaining and
stylish. It was also distinctly Macaulayan: one suspected that he
had misread his brief as being “Why should we celebrate the Life of
Samuel Johnson?” It was not hard to find matters with which to
disagree, but the viewpoint he expressed is a serious one and what
time to review it than the Tercentenary? The belief that the
best of Johnson is Boswell remains commonplace.

So when Professor Christopher Ricks rose to give the second
address, “Why should we celebrate the work of Samuel Johnson?” he
found himself cast as counsel for the defense. Should he ever tire
of editing Eliot and deconstructing Dylan, a glittering future at the
bar is assured: he rose to the occasion with aplomb. Bringing to the

—MICHAEL BUNDOCK

Johnson at Bucknell

In late March, about thirty people with varying degrees

of interest in Samuel Johnson came to Lewisburg,

Pennsylvania, to join a collection of Bucknell students,

faculty, and librarians for a celebration of the tercentenary

of Johnson's birth. The host of the event, Professor Greg Clinkham,

offered a number of activities spread out over the course of

three days, beginning with a superb Chinese meal for everyone who

arrived the night before the official events began. Johnsonian

conversation flourished, and as often happens at such introduc-

tory gatherings, friendships new and old were solidified.

The following afternoon, Leo Damrosch, Christopher Ricks, and

David Ferry spoke on Johnson in the Stadler Center for Poetry, one

of the university's thoughtfully restored old buildings. The talks

seemed to define the celebration's distinctiveness. In this year of

tercentenary celebrations, one often hears of the difference

between meetings of scholarly specialists, who have devoted years
to intense study of this or that aspect of Johnson, and meetings of

learned amateurs, who perhaps read Johnson at night or on the

weekends after long days in the office, far outside of "the shelter of
academia." What truly seemed different, and gratifying, about the

Bucknell celebration was that it didn't seem similar to either of

these types of meetings. As the principal speakers' talks
suggested, the Bucknell celebration proposed that the ways of responding to Johnson are legion, and not easily classifiable. Professors Damrosch, Ricks, and Ferry—each of whom would probably resist being labeled a Johnson specialist—proved that one needn't be a Johnson scholar to write compellingly on Johnson. Damrosch, Ricks, and Ferry are influential, widely read authors, and their responses to Johnson underscored how his life and writing continue to nurture remarkably different kinds of writers.

Professor Damrosch of Harvard opened the celebration with a wonderfully elegant essay on Johnson and Rousseau, highlighting the significance of their differences. (See pp. 8-17 above for the text of Professor Damrosch’s essay.) The subtitle of his talk indicated his biographical emphasis: “Two Styles of Thinking and Being.” Professor Ricks, of Oxford and Boston University, addressed Johnson’s ideas about “sound and sense.” Professor Ricks presented Johnson’s ideas with such a range of associations—all thought-provoking—that the audience early on found itself in the presence of a contemporary critic excelling, as Boswell puts it of Johnson in the Life, “in the art of thinking, the art of using his mind.” After a short break for more snacks and wine, we heard from Professor David Ferry, of Wellesley College and Boston University, who read aloud passages from his own poetry. He emphasized those passages where he was specifically dependent on Johnson. Few people in the audience, I’m sure, will forget Professor Ferry’s reading of his own moving, Johnsonian poem about a dinner party he attended—at which one of the diners suffered a stroke. These presentations, while fundamentally different from one another, shared two characteristics: they put on display each speaker’s longstanding interest in Johnson, and they were fully comprehensible to everyone in the room, including those Bucknell students who were only beginning to read Johnson seriously.

After lingering to “talk Johnson” a little while longer in the Stadler Center, we eventually made our way up the hill to the Bertrand Library, where on the second floor about forty people shuffled about, searching for their place-cards at a splendid formal dinner. (Off to the side, a student played eighteenth-century music on the harpsichord.) Ever thoughtful of how best to stimulate rewarding conversation, Professor Clingham had shrewdly jettisoned the standard boy-girl pattern in favor of what appeared to be a Bucknell faculty/non-Bucknell faculty set-up. I happened to have been positioned next to John Rickard, the chair of the Bucknell English department. Inevitably, the two of us couldn’t help but rejoice in various comic and satiric formulations underscoring the obvious contrast between Johnson’s life and work, and that of an

English Department chair. Talk of Johnson’s and Boswell’s robust social lives evolved into talk of the risible social complexities involved in setting up faculty teaching schedules.

Three appropriately short speeches further enlivened our dinner. All of a sudden, it seemed, the chair of the English Department rose and delivered a few very funny words on the act of celebrating Johnson. The president of Bucknell, Brian C. Mitchell (who has recently written a book on Irish-American immigrants in Massachusetts) offered a perfectly presidential, well-conceived statement on the significance of such a celebration taking place at a liberal arts college, which put, he said with a smile, Bucknell in the same league with Harvard and Pembroke College, Oxford. And finally Professor Robert DeMaria, Jr. artfully adjusted the rituals of the toast of the American Johnsonians in his own brief toast. With glass fully charged, Professor DeMaria asked all present to consider Johnson’s tercentenary celebration in relation to a handful of wise words from Rasselas. We should learn from Johnson the “proper use of the time” and appreciate the “gratifications that are before us”—and raise our glasses not to “the immortal memory,” but to “the present moment. Esto praesentia.”

The next morning, Professor Philip Smallwood, of Birmingham City University, and Mr. Adam Rounce, of Manchester Metropolitan University—both of whom came from England to rural Pennsylvania for the celebration—joined the principal speakers in a recorded conversation about the current state of interest in Johnson, in both Britain and the United States. Why, asked the moderator Professor Clingham, has so much work on Johnson taken place in recent years in the United States? What is the status of Johnson in both British and American universities—among both undergraduates and more advanced students? Various explanations to these questions and others were bandied about, and from time to time, members of the small audience jumped in. Fittingly, this meeting was held in the rare book room of the Bertrand Library, only steps from the showcases displaying various Johnsonian items at Bucknell.

The end of this session brought the celebration to a close. Notably, many of us, as we began to return to our different places in the world, made more than the usual plans to get together again—a fitting end to a celebration that strengthened the belief that Johnson’s influence, three hundred years after his birth, is alive and well. And not just among academic specialists and learned amateurs.

—J. T. Scanlan