

Samuel Johnson, had he lived, would turn 300 this year. Celebrations have been taking place around the world in locations that range from his birthplace, Lichfield, and his workplace, London, to North America, Australia, Japan, and anywhere else a Johnson Society is to be found. Besides the conferences, banquets and exhibitions, there have been some more creative events – for example a charity walk re-enacting Johnson’s first journey to London in the company of his pupil David Garrick (with one horse between them). There has also been a spurt of publication; not perhaps as much as might have been expected in honour of one of the greatest writers in English, but then books by and about Johnson appear so regularly that presses don’t need the spur of a tercentenary. He is one of those rare writers of the distant past who continue to have a popular following, whose names are not known only, as he put it in one of his *Rambler* papers, in “cloisters or colleges . . . these dark and narrow habitations, these last retreats of fame”. It is heartening to see that for now we seem to have struck a balance between attention to his character and attention to his works.

I learnt about the charity walk from a dedicated website, www.johnson2009.org, and about some other festivities from one of the books under review, *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, which fortunately takes a liberal view of what can be recommended under “Further Reading”. This useful collection of essays, commissioned for the occasion from a group of established scholars, occupies a middle ground between introductory and specialist studies: while it is obviously directed at an academic readership (probably not undergraduates), it could well be of interest to a wider audience and will be good for both groups, for it breaks with the tradition of cosy, clubby, introverted Johnsonianism. As David Fairer puts it in an engaging paper about “The Awkward Johnson”, “Our criticism is always in danger of merely reproducing, confirming, paraphrasing, or explicating Johnson’s own view, rather than subjecting him to critical curiosity”. Not so here.

It is customary to say of an essay collection that the contributions are uneven in quality: with multiple authors they would be, wouldn’t they? In this case, however, the standard is high and remarkably uniform, though the papers address such diverse subjects as Johnson’s moral philosophy, his legal thinking, the impact of his work on literary biography, and his value to women of the generation after his own. Since the essays are relatively short, it is possible to pick and choose, and none of them takes much time to read. The editors wanted to bring Johnson into the eighteenth century – that is, to bring Johnsonian scholarship and criticism out of a backwater into the mainstream of eighteenth-century studies, catching up with recent trends – and in that they have succeeded.

The collection has some over-riding themes, to which the pretty but obscure jacket illustration offers a clue. It shows a strapping redhead, barefoot, in a loose powder-blue gown, reclining on a cloud with an open scroll in her hand. A Muse, you might suppose. No, she’s Reynolds’s representation of Theory, and thereby hangs a tale. As the editors explain in their introduction, the volume aims to reflect developments in critical thinking since the last major anniversary,

By perseverance

H. J. JACKSON

Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood, editors

SAMUEL JOHNSON AFTER 300 YEARS
291pp. Cambridge University Press. £55 (US \$95).
978 0 521 88821 9

Thomas M. Curley

SAMUEL JOHNSON, THE “OSSIAN” FRAUD, AND THE CELTIC REVIVAL IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND
338pp. Cambridge University Press. £55 (US \$95).
978 0 521 40747 2

Peter Martin

SAMUEL JOHNSON
A biography
522pp. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £25 (US \$35).
978 0 297 60719 9

Johnson’s 250th. And Theory was what happened in and to humanities departments in that period. Theory in the narrow sense of a certain kind of Anglo-French criticism may now be a thing of the past, but its refreshing effect can be seen in the way in which most of the essays in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years* make an effort to consider Johnson’s works in a broad intellectual context that is not necessarily historical. So Fred Parker, writing about Johnson as a moral philosopher, compares him with Bernard Williams as well as with Aristotle and Hume; and Greg Clingham, on “ends” and happiness, draws on Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, among others.

rather than with defenders of the status quo. Isobel Grundy, drawing on years of productive labour with the Orlando Project and not satisfied with reiterating Johnson’s well-documented support for women writers, brings the tributes of unknown authors as well as celebrated ones to show “the rootedness of feminism in humanism”. Overall, the collection shakes up fusty stereotypes and encourages fresh thinking. Johnson himself, we are properly reminded, was in his day a provocative writer, a challenger of received wisdom.

One of the issues over which he found himself at odds with many of his contemporaries was the genuineness of “Ossian”, epic poems supposedly translated from Scottish Gaelic into poetic prose by James Macpherson, who claimed to have worked from ancient manuscripts but could not produce the originals. Johnson publicly questioned the authenticity of the poems and defied Macpherson to show his proofs. Broadly speaking, he was in the right. After more than two centuries of controversy, we know that Macpherson built a massive body of work on the basis of a scant oral tradition and a handful of written ballads. But the idea of a native epic was exciting, and Macpherson’s work turned out to be popular and influential in its own right, whatever its sources. Johnson and Macpherson were both buried in Westminster Abbey; the dispute between them, astonishingly, lives on.

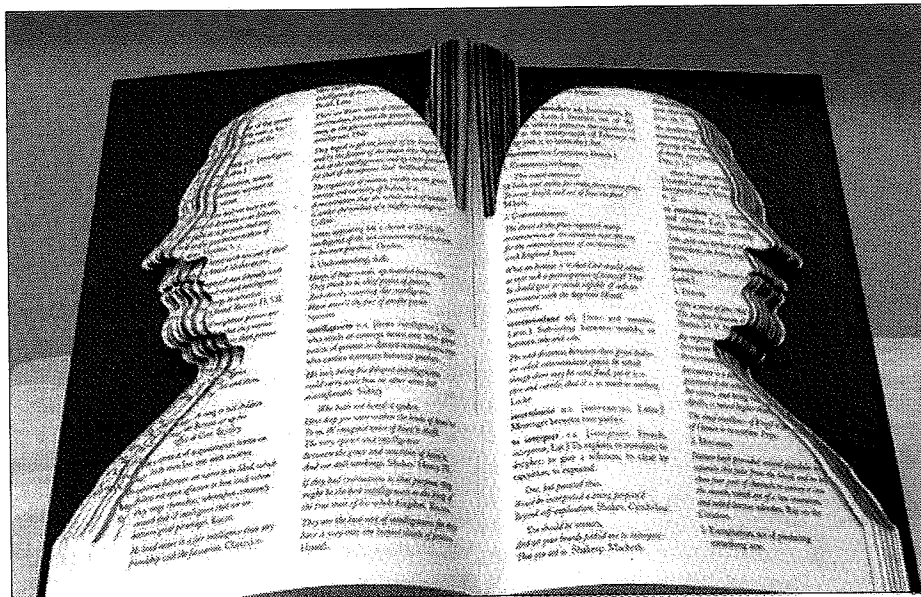
Thomas Curley’s *Samuel Johnson, the “Ossian” Fraud, and the Celtic Revival* is not about Ossian but it provides a full account of the controversy, bringing it up to the present day. Curley has been writing about aspects of this esoteric quarrel for many years; his book revisits, consolidates, and to some extent recycles earlier work,

to budding efforts of Scottish nationalism. To counter these shocking trends, Curley musters evidence to display Johnson as “the supreme truth-teller in English literature” and the “intellectual midwife at the birth of the Celtic Revival in Ireland”. Most of the new exhibits in this study – loudly trumpeted “rare”, neglected, or previously unpublished letters and pamphlets – have to do with the latter claim.

Facts linking Johnson to the Celtic Revival of the twentieth century are thin on the ground, so Curley makes his case by accumulating circumstantial details. Johnson’s first honorary doctorate came from an Irish university. Some of his Irish acquaintances, not in the inner circle, were involved in political struggles on behalf of Roman Catholics. The clincher is a letter of 1757 from Johnson, the author of the recent *Dictionary of the English Language*, in response to the gift of a book about ancient Ireland. Johnson encourages the author to pursue investigations into the history of the language: he’d like to know, for instance, “What relation there is between the Welch, and Irish Languages, or between the language of Ireland, and that of Biscay”. What might appear to be merely a polite response, an act of courtesy between one historian of language and another, Curley interprets as “a landmark manifesto for all Irish studies”, “a call for a renaissance of modern learning about Ireland”, an “advocacy of Irish studies” and hence a boost for “the fledgling discipline of Irish studies” that eventually led to the Celtic Revival. Almost half the book is taken up with this overstated claim. Curley’s parting shot, a chapter arguing, mainly on the basis of internal evidence, that Johnson was the “ghost-writer” of a part of a pamphlet by William Shaw, is similarly tenuous. It has long been known that Johnson read Shaw’s “Reply to Mr. Clark’s Answer” in draft and made suggestions for improvements in style. To present him as a collaborator, let alone a ghost-writer, however, is a stretch. If Johnson was, as Curley claims, a champion of absolute truth, what would he make of exaggeration? Does not any degree of distortion sink to the level of fraud and falsehood?

In contrast to Curley’s specialist polemical study, Peter Martin’s solid new starter biography of Johnson is directed to a general audience and does not appear to have any axes to grind. Martin played the role of Johnson in the charity walk mentioned earlier, and one of the strengths of his work is the way that he identifies himself with his subject, as John Wain did very effectively thirty-five years ago. Martin takes seriously Johnson’s chronic sense of suffering and his practically lifelong self-reproach of idleness, so he tells a sombre though dignified story about “a man beset by problems common to us all”.

The life of Johnson presents special difficulties for a biographer, first because it was long (he lived to seventy-five) but unevenly documented, and second because it is inevitably written in the shadow of Boswell, who himself approached the job competitively. “To write the Life of him who excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others”, Boswell observed in the opening sentence of his *Life*, “is an arduous, and may be reckoned in me a presumptuous task.” It soon becomes clear that he considered himself to be in competition not only with Johnson, who was not to be equalled, but also with the several



A cut book by Jane Prophet, from the exhibition *The House of Words* at Dr Johnson’s House, London, until August 29

As a consequence of such re-contextualizing, Johnson now looks different from the Johnson of fifty years ago. Howard Weinbrot boldly gives us Johnson as a Modern, in contrast to the standard image of a reactionary high-church Tory. Fred Parker’s analysis takes him (Johnson, that is) beyond Christian Stoicism. Clement Hawes, invoking Rorty, Leibniz and Pascal, aligns him with sceptics

taking a comprehensive view of the dispute. When he was a graduate student, he says, he naively thought the question had finally been settled. (Some might have thought Malcolm Laing had settled it in 1805.) But then there arose postmodernism, post-colonialism and Theory – in short, relativism. Macpherson could be and was portrayed as an unappreciated artist, Johnson as a racist bigot opposed

contemporaries who had published rival memoirs before him. (The third paragraph of the *Life*, one stunning sentence sixteen lines long that reads like the Constitution of a small country, outlines his superior qualifications.) Boswell remains the one to beat. But the obvious shortcomings of his great work were a gift to later contenders. He did not meet Johnson until Johnson was in his mid-fifties and an established authority; the two of them came from different generations, different classes and different nations; he did not actually spend much time with him; he padded his work with documents, so that it has more the feeling of an archive or a chronicle than a connected narrative; and he intruded himself in what many readers to this day have considered an unseemly fashion.

Martin's corrective to Boswell takes various forms. He tries to give even coverage to every phase of Johnson's life. For Boswell's clubman he gives us a man who also valued the society of women; for Boswell's Londoner, a ready traveller; for Boswell's giant (or bear, or ogre), a character on a more human scale, someone who succeeded against the odds and possibly because rather than in spite of his infirmities. His treatment of Johnson's works – always a key question in literary biography – is characteristic: he puts practically all of them in, not just recording their publication as Boswell did, not mining them for biographical facts nor parroting standard criticism as other biographers have done, but summarizing them and offering his

own explanation of their importance. This method should be helpful to readers new to Johnson, who constitute most of the intended audience, and even old hands might need to be reminded about lesser sermons, journalism and political tracts. Having already produced biographies of Boswell and Malone (who was instrumental in seeing Boswell's *Life* into print), Martin is well acquainted with both eighteenth-century records and up-to-the-minute scholarship, which he integrates seamlessly into his cradle-to-grave narrative. He shows good judgement in handling some of the more sensational episodes of the Johnson legend, such as the padlock canard. The book is well produced, with just a few typographical errors (such as "Staples Inn" for "Staple Inn" and "St. Clement's Dane" for "St. Clement Danes") to keep readers on their toes.

The drawback of Martin's even-handed approach is that with such a long life and with a substantial proportion of the text already committed to discussion of Johnson's writings, no event, person, or place can be presented in depth. Everything seems to be there, but everything flits by. Martin's style is uniform: readable, reliable, unassuming. There are longueurs. On the other hand, since the book consistently focuses on Johnson's inner life – his motives, his reactions, his likely feelings at every stage – a sense of depth arises from that prolonged and sustained connection. Like the forward-looking *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, this book will leave readers wanting to know more.

Mrs Bennet entertains

ELIZABETH SCOTT-BAUMANN

Hazel Jones

JANE AUSTEN AND MARRIAGE
248pp. Continuum. £25 (US \$29.95).
978 1 84725 218 0

The eighteenth century saw major changes in the status of marriage in law, literature and society. Arranged marriages co-existed with love matches, and continental visitors commented that young people in Britain had more freedom in their choices than those in other parts of Europe. Conduct books often focused on the "cultivation of refined helplessness", but women's vulnerability was not always cultivated: in 1782, a prominent judge advocated wife-beating (though he stipulated scrupulously that the stick must be no thicker than a man's thumb). The Revd James Fordyce's sermons (beloved by Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* but inducing Lydia Bennet's yawns) promoted feminine weakness as a spur to male protective impulses. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays argued for female education as training for productive professions rather than as a superficial attraction designed to allure men. In *Jane Austen and Marriage*, Hazel Jones presents an institution in transition, riven with contradictions and complexities.

Austen's heroines are, of course, neither helpless nor physically beleaguered, and it is their independence and "feistiness" that have attracted to Austen a fanbase that extends far beyond academic and exclusively literary circles. The witty sparring of Lizzie, Emma and Elinor, combined with their aspirational marriages into a higher social sphere, has made them attractive to filmmakers. This combination of female autonomy and romantic endings has proved to be profoundly appealing to young women in the twenty-first century, and Austen's heroines have been transmuted into the protagonists of the recent television series *Lost in Austen* and the film *Becoming Jane*.

"A single man in possession of a good fortune was not in want of a wife, unless he chose to be" – Austen's famous opening sentence is re-formulated several times in the book. There is much dashing of hopes, angling for proposals, popping the question, not to mention certain lucky men characterized as the "Georgian equivalent of eye-candy". The chapters are organized by theme – "Wedding Journeys", "Scandal and Gossip" – and Jones moves swiftly between novels, diaries and letters. The anecdotes and quotations refer almost always to marriage among the gentry and aristocracy, the social classes which most often feature in Austen's novels. Her treatment of marriage is set against the lively background of contemporary letter-writers and social commentators, rather than of other novelists' works.

For example, Jones argues that Mrs Bennet, obnoxiously militating for her daughters' betrothals, seems to have been a recognized type. Mary Russell Mitford reports of "the manoeuvrers", ie, mothers with "inimitable talents for plots, schemes, and puffing, match making and match-breaking". Such women presumably brought up the kind of daughters



Mark Strong and Kate Beckinsale in *Emma*

deplored in the *Lewes and Brighthelmstone Journal* – the ones who "expose themselves in dancing the Irish wriggle with any fellow in a bit of scarlet and a feather". Red military jackets, Jones observes, acted as a "physical magnet" at balls where women commonly outnumbered men.

Jones's ample use of archival and manuscript sources provide illuminating and amusing insights that complement Austen's own, in her letters to her sister Cassandra. In this correspondence, Austen pays scrupulous attention to scandal and lapses in decorum, as well as the more pressing and serious concerns of money and illness. Austen's six brothers offer further instances of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century marriages, involving bereavement, naval marriage and maternity. Of one pregnant sister-in-law, Austen remarks, in a startlingly direct tone, "Mrs F. A. [Frank Austen] seldom either looks or appears quite well. – Little Embryo is troublesome I suppose". When discussing her own romantic life, Austen is, unsurprisingly, more reticent. After refusing the proposal of a plain but younger and richer man (Harris Bigg-Wither), she comments, "the place & fortune which would certainly be his, could not alter the man".

The chapter on "White Satin and Lace Veils" contains accounts of wedding dresses, nightcaps, gloves, shoes and cakes, making readers thankful for Austen's own lack of interest in such material description. One bridesmaid, overwhelmed by the accoutrements of marriage, described the bride as so much adorned "that she looked as if by mistake she had put on two wedding dresses instead of one". The wry use of bathos and irony in many of the contemporary sources quoted here recalls Austen's ironic style, and it would be interesting to learn more about the way her narrative techniques were influenced by epistolary style and conduct books of the period. Austen's letters can be searing, commenting on the first ball of the season at Hurstbourne Park in 1800, "Mrs Blount . . . appeared exactly as she did in September, with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, & fat neck". *Jane Austen and Marriage* offers a lively introduction to the romance plots of Austen's novels, and her contemporaries' views of marriage.

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