

Johnson's Dictionary

For the century before Johnson's Dictionary was published in 1775, there had been concern about the state of the English language. There was no standard way of speaking or writing and no agreement as to the best way of bringing some order to the chaos of English spelling. Dr Johnson provided the solution.

There had, of course, been dictionaries in the past, the first of these being a little book of some 120 pages, compiled by a certain Robert Cawdray, published in 1604 under the title *A Table Alphabeticall of hard usual English words*. Like the various dictionaries that came after it during the seventeenth century, Cawdray's tended to concentrate on 'scholarly' words; one function of the dictionary was to enable its student to convey an impression of fine learning.

Beyond the practical need to make order out of chaos, the rise of dictionaries is associated with the rise of the English middle class, who were anxious to define and circumscribe the various worlds to conquer lexical as well as social and commercial. It is highly appropriate that Dr Samuel Johnson, the very model of an eighteenth-century literary man, as famous in his own time as in ours, should have published his Dictionary at the very beginning of the heyday of the middle class.

Johnson was a poet and critic who raised common sense to the heights of genius. His approach to the problems that had worried writers throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was intensely practical. Up until his time, the task of producing a dictionary on such a large scale had seemed impossible without the establishment of an academy to make decisions about right and wrong usage. Johnson decided he did not need an academy to settle arguments about language; he would write a dictionary himself; and he would do it single-handed. Johnson signed the contract for the Dictionary with the bookseller Robert Dodsley at a breakfast held at the Golden Anchor Inn near Holborn Bar on 18 June 1764. He was to be paid £1,575 in instalments, and from this he took money to rent 17 Gough Square, in which he set up his 'dictionary workshop'.

James Boswell, his biographer described the garret where Johnson worked as 'fitted up like a counting house' with a long desk running down the middle at which the copying clerks would work standing up.

Johnson himself was stationed on a rickety chair at an 'old crazy deal table' surrounded by a chaos of borrowed books. He was also helped by six assistants, two of whom died whilst the Dictionary was still in preparation.

The work was immense; filing about eighty large notebooks (and without a library to hand), Johnson wrote the definitions of over 40,000 words, and illustrated their many meanings with some 114,000 quotations drawn from English writing on every subject, from the Elizabethans to his own time. He did not expect to achieve complete originality. Working to a deadline, he had to draw on the best of all previous dictionaries, and to make his work one of heroic synthesis. In fact, it was very much more.

Unlike his predecessors, Johnson treated English very practically, as a living language, with many different shades of meaning. He adopted his definitions on the principle of English common law - according to precedent. After its publication, his Dictionary was not seriously rivalled for over a century.

After many vicissitudes the Dictionary was finally published on 15 April 1775. It was instantly recognised as a landmark throughout Europe. 'This very noble work;' wrote the leading Italian lexicographer, will be a perpetual monument of Fame to the Author, an Honour to his own Country in particular, and a general

Benefit to the republic of Letters throughout Europe. The fact that Johnson had taken on the Academies of Europe and matched them (everyone knew that forty French academics had taken forty years to produce the first French national dictionary) was cause for much English celebration.

Johnson had worked for nine years, 'with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academic bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow'. For all its faults and eccentricities his two-volume work is a masterpiece and a landmark, in his own words, 'setting the orthography, displaying the analogy, regulating the structures, and ascertaining the significations of English words'. It is the cornerstone of Standard English, an achievement which, in James Boswell's words, 'conferred stability on the language of his country'.

The Dictionary, together with his other writing, made Johnson famous and so well esteemed that his friends were able to prevail upon King George III to offer him a pension. From then on, he was to become the Johnson of folklore.

Questions 1-3

Choose THREE letters A-H.

NB Your answers may be given in any order.

Which THREE of the following statements are true of Johnson's Dictionary?

- A. It avoided all scholarly words.
- B. It was the only English dictionary in general use for 200 years.
- C. It was famous because of the large number of people involved.
- D. It focused mainly on language from contemporary texts.
- E. There was a time limit for its completion.
- F. It ignored work done by previous dictionary writers.
- G. It took into account subtleties of meaning.
- H. Its definitions were famous for their originality.

Questions 4-7

Complete the summary.

Choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer.

In 1764 Dr Johnson accepted the contract to produce a dictionary. Having rented a garret, he took on a number of 4 , who stood at a long central desk. Johnson did not have a 5 available to him, but eventually produced definitions of in excess of 40,000 words written down in 80 large notebooks. On publication, the Dictionary was immediately hailed in many European countries as a landmark. According to his biographer, James Boswell, Johnson's principal

achievement was to bring 6 to the English language. As a reward for his hard work, he was granted a 7 by the king.

Questions 8-13

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 1?

Write:

TRUE if the statement agrees with the information

FALSE if the statement contradicts the information

NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this

8. The growing importance of the middle classes led to an increased demand for dictionaries.
9. Johnson has become more well known since his death.
10. Johnson had been planning to write a dictionary for several years.
11. Johnson set up an academy to help with the writing of his Dictionary.
12. Johnson only received payment for his Dictionary on its completion.
13. Not all of the assistants survived to see the publication of the Dictionary.