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JOHNSON AND HIS CIRCLE**

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BY JOHN BAILEY

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Editors :

HERBERT FISHER, M.A., F.B.A.

PROF. GILBERT MURRAY, D.LITT.,
LL.D., F.B.A.

PROF. J. ARTHUR THOMSON, M.A.

PROF. WILLIAM T. BREWSTER, M.A.
(Columbia University, U.S.A.)

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AND HIS CIRCLE

BY

JOHN BAILEY

AUTHOR OF "POETS AND POETRY," "THE
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DR. JOHNSON AND HIS CIRCLE

CHAPTER I

JOHNSON AS A NATIONAL INSTITUTION

THE name of Samuel Johnson is, of course, not the greatest in English prose, but even to-day, when he has been dead more than a century and a quarter, it is still the most familiar. We live in an age of newspapers. Where all can read, the newspaper press, taken as a whole, will be a fairly accurate reflection of what is in the mind of a people. Nothing will be mentioned frequently in newspapers which is not of some interest to a large number of readers; and whatever is frequently mentioned there cannot fail to become widely known. Tried by this test, Johnson's name must be admitted to be very widely known and of almost universal interest. No man of letters—perhaps scarcely even Shakespeare himself—is so often quoted in the columns of the daily press. His is a name that may

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be safely introduced into any written or spoken discussion, without fear of the stare of unrecognizing ignorance; and the only danger to which those who quote him expose themselves is that of the yawn of over-familiarity. Even in his own lifetime his reputation extended far beyond the limited circle of literature or scholarship. Actresses delighted in his conversation; soldiers were proud to entertain him in their barracks; innkeepers boasted of his having slept in their inns. His celebrity was such that he himself once said there was hardly a day in which the newspapers did not mention his name; and a year after his death Boswell could venture to write publicly of him that his "character, religious, moral, political and literary, nay his figure and manner, are, I believe, more generally known than those of almost any man." But what was, in his own day, partly a respect paid to the maker of the famous *Dictionary* and partly a curiosity about "the great Oddity," as the Edensor innkeeper called him, has in the course of the nineteenth century become a great deal more.

He is still for us the great scholar and the strongly marked individuality, but he has gradually attained a kind of apotheosis, a kind of semi-legendary position, almost rivalling that of the great John Bull himself, as the