

**SAMUEL
JOHNSON**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649156863

Samuel Johnson by Leslie Stephen

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LESLIE STEPHEN

**SAMUEL
JOHNSON**

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

SAMUEL JOHNSON

BY
LESLIE STEPIEN



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SAMUEL JOHNSON.

CHAPTER I.

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY LIFE.

SAMUEL JOHNSON was born in Lichfield in 1709. His father, Michael Johnson, was a bookseller, highly respected by the cathedral clergy, and for a time sufficiently prosperous to be a magistrate of the town, and, in the year of his son's birth, sheriff of the county. He opened a bookstall on market-days at neighbouring towns, including Birmingham, which was as yet unable to maintain a separate bookseller. The tradesman often exaggerates the prejudices of the class whose wants he supplies, and Michael Johnson was probably a more devoted High Churchman and Tory than many of the cathedral clergy themselves. He reconciled himself with difficulty to taking the oaths against the exiled dynasty. He was a man of considerable mental and physical power, but tormented by hypochondriacal tendencies. His son inherited a share both of his constitution and of his principles. Long afterwards Samuel associated with his childish days a faint but solemn recollection of a lady in diamonds and long black hood. The lady

was Queen Anne, to whom, in compliance with a superstition just dying a natural death, he had been taken by his mother to be touched for the king's evil. The touch was ineffectual. Perhaps, as Boswell suggested, he ought to have been presented to the genuine heirs of the Stuarts in Rome. Disease and superstition had thus stood by his cradle, and they never quitted him during life. The demon of hypochondria was always lying in wait for him, and could be exorcised for a time only by hard work or social excitement. Of this we shall hear enough; but it may be as well to sum up at once some of the physical characteristics which marked him through life and greatly influenced his career.

The disease had scarred and disfigured features otherwise regular and always impressive. It had seriously injured his eyes, entirely destroying, it seems, the sight of one. He could not, it is said, distinguish a friend's face half a yard off, and pictures were to him meaningless patches, in which he could never see the resemblance to their objects. The statement is perhaps exaggerated; for he could see enough to condemn a portrait of himself. He expressed some annoyance when Reynolds had painted him with a pen held close to his eye; and protested that he would not be handed down to posterity as "blinking Sam." It seems that habits of minute attention atoned in some degree for this natural defect. Boswell tells us how Johnson once corrected him as to the precise shape of a mountain; and Mrs. Thrale says that he was a close and exacting critic of ladies' dress, even to the accidental position of a riband. He could even lay down æsthetical canons upon such matters. He reproved her for wearing a dark dress as unsuitable to a "little creature." "What," he asked, "have not all insects gay colours?" His insen-

sibility to music was even more pronounced than his dulness of sight. On hearing it said, in praise of a musical performance, that it was in any case difficult, his feeling comment was, "I wish it had been impossible!"

The queer convulsions by which he amazed all beholders were probably connected with his disease, though he and Reynolds ascribed them simply to habit. When entering a doorway with his blind companion, Miss Williams, he would suddenly desert her on the step in order to "whirl and twist about" in strange gesticulations. The performance partook of the nature of a superstitious ceremonial. He would stop in a street or the middle of a room to go through it correctly. Once he collected a laughing mob in Twickenham meadows by his antics; his hands imitating the motions of a jockey riding at full speed and his feet twisting in and out to make heels and toes touch alternately. He presently sat down and took out a *Crolius De Veritate*, over which he "seesawed" so violently that the mob ran back to see what was the matter. Once in such a fit he suddenly twisted off the shoe of a lady who sat by him. Sometimes he seemed to be obeying some hidden impulse, which commanded him to touch every post in a street or tread on the centre of every paving-stone, and would return if his task had not been accurately performed.

In spite of such oddities, he was not only possessed of physical power corresponding to his great height and massive stature, but was something of a proficient at athletic exercises. He was conversant with the theory, at least, of boxing; a knowledge probably acquired from an uncle who kept the ring at Smithfield for a year, and was never beaten in boxing or wrestling. His constitutional fearlessness would have made him a formidable antagonist.