



SAMUEL JOHNSON'S LONDON

EACH year London gentlemen make a journey to Lichfield on September 7, there to visit Johnson's birthplace, the little bookseller's shop, and the Three Crowns. And yet it is not Lichfield which comes first into our minds when thinking of Johnson, but London—Fleet Street, Bolt Court, and the Mitre Tavern. Johnson had a genuine affection for Lichfield and his friends there, but his real love was given to London, and Boswell tells us, "He would have thought himself an exile in any other place." He evidently thought that the road which led to London was the most alluring of all prospects, not only for a Scotchman but for all others as well, for he said, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford."

Yet to us a description of eighteenth century London does not seem exactly that of Elysium. The streets were narrow and

most unattractive, to say the least. There were no sidewalks but, in the streets most congested with traffic, posts were set up along the sides to safeguard pedestrians against being run over by carriages and carts. Surface water and filth were carried off in open drains, or gutters, which ran through the middle of the streets, to the great detriment of the gentlemen's white silk stockings. Stone doorsteps jutted out into the pavements so that it was difficult to walk at night, especially since the lighting system was very inadequate. Robberies were so numerous as to make firearms necessary; so Dr. Johnson may be pardoned for his warlike preparations for his trip to the Hebrides. Until 1736 the only method of lighting the town was by candles, each householder being required to keep a candle burning before his house from six until eleven in the evening. Then, because of the increased robberies and murders, oil

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lamps were substituted. These, which were kept in order by the lamplighters hired by the city officials, were paid for by a tax levied upon the householders—a tax regulated by the amount of the rent of each house. There were other street dangers, or certainly nuisances: rubbish in heaps along the way, numbers of mad dogs, swarms of beggars, ruinous houses, cattle driven through the streets.

The living conditions of the London populace were poor. The drinking water, which was by this time piped into practically all the houses of the city, was brought in wooden mains from the Thames, or from ponds, and there seem to have been no filtration plants, though there were some complaints as to the number of bathers in the Thames every Sunday morning. Nor was the water supply always at hand at the turn of a tap, but it was furnished on only three days in the week. Needless to say that epidemics were many and fearful, and the mortality rate was very high. Not only was the drinking water unsafe and all sanitary conditions very bad, but there were no laws to guarantee the quality of food-stuffs. Bread was not, in the main, adulterated; but other foods were, particularly milk, and in the milk-houses it was the regular custom to have a pump to simplify the matter of watering this beverage.

There were two extremes in London life of the eighteenth century—squalor, poverty, and filth on one hand; luxury, gayety, and extravagance on the other. There was the London of St. James's and the Pall Mall and Hyde Park section; there was the London of the wharf rats or of the tumble-down houses on London Bridge. But Johnson's London was not in either of these. Though occasionally in touch with both extremes, Johnson was of neither.

In 1808 there was published in London a little book of 4 by 5 inches, but made up of over 460 pages, which claimed to be a "correct guide to all the curiosities, amuse-

ments, exhibitions, public establishments, and remarkable objects in and near London." This little red-bound book, then in its ninth edition, really did give a mass of miscellaneous material about the city and its life—which is very interesting when compared with our own time. Many pages of this book are devoted to public amusements and galleries: Drury Lane, Covent Garden, the Italian Opera, the Pantheon, or the summer spectacles at Haymarket Theatre, Vauxhall Gardens, and other places. But this was not Johnson's London. While he loved to be entertained, and was the most sociable of men, he did not—dressed in velvet coat, lace ruffles, and curled wig—step into a sedan chair and hie away to the resorts of the average pleasure-seeker. Instead—in shabby coat, with "snuffy" ruffles, if any, and his old scorched wig—he would take his lumbering way down to the Mitre Tavern, touching each post on the way, and muttering to himself as he rolled along. It was not the gay pageantry of the Thames pleasure-boats which he sought, but the brilliant wit and enlivening conversation of his literary friends around a bottle of port.

Johnson's London was the London of Fleet Street and its environs, a quarter north of the Strand occupied by coffee houses, taverns, theatres, a great market, and the people belonging to these places. Even yet is Fleet Street associated with literary work and publishers, and today this street, or *piece* of street, is filled with newspaper offices and the lodgings of those who carry on such work. In and around this street, in this limited district lying just outside one of the western gates of the old city walls, Johnson lived for forty-seven years, driving down through Southwark to Streatham, venturing out to the royal library at the palace, going for an occasional visit to Lichfield or Oxford, or even penetrating the dreadful wilds of Scotland, but always coming home to Fleet Street. He

agreed with Boswell in saying that no beauties of nature could be equal to Fleet Street.

In all Johnson's life in London he had lodgings in seventeen different places. The first of these was in Exeter Street, opening into the Strand. Here, when in 1737 he and Garrick came to London, Johnson lodged in a garret at the house of Norris, a stay-maker, and finished writing his *Irene*. Here in this Venetian street, looking out on the water which glittered under the sun or turned leaden under the clouds, he lived as a struggler. At the eight-penny ordinary, the Pine Apple, in New Street, where he dined, he was noticeable for his gaunt, lank form and scarred, twitching face, but more for his learning and for his conversational powers. For some time he lived on four-pence-halfpenny a day, and paid visits on clean-shirt days only. He met "very good company" at the Pine Apple; for though no one knew his neighbor's name, some had traveled. "It used to cost the rest," the Doctor related proudly in after-life at great tables, "a shilling, for they drank wine; but I had a cut of meat for sixpence, and bread for a penny, so that I was quite well served; nay, better than the rest, for they gave the waiter nothing." This Exeter Street was that in which Exeter House once stood, and where lived Earl Cecil, son of the celebrated Burleigh. There was a wide gap between the Exeter Street of Johnson's garret, amidst most unsavory surroundings, and the Exeter Street of Elizabethan days—days when the street was ever rustling with satin, when gilded coaches were constantly passing and silk canopied boats putting off to Elizabeth's palaces, either at Greenwich or Whitehall.

It was to a house in Oxford Street that Johnson brought his fat, red-cheeked Tetsy. At that time this was a section quite unfashionable, and here Johnson was probably further away from Fleet Street than at any other period during his London residence. About this time also he lived for a

short while in Bow Street. All the great authors and actors had lived here when the place was more fashionable. Here Johnson dwelt when drudging for Cave, tramping out perpetually to St. John's Gate in Clerkenwell to see him, and there frequently dining behind a screen, since he did not consider himself well enough dressed to appear in company with Cave's more distinguished guests.

There were other dwelling places of Johnson's, of which but little is known. He had for a short time a lodging in Woodstock Street, far away from printers and taverns; there was a brief stay in that grimy defile known as Fetter Lane; and he also lived for a time in Bedford Street in a house opposite Henrietta Street. This was one of those thoroughfares in which the traffic was sufficiently heavy to necessitate the use of posts to safeguard pedestrians from vehicles and horses. Sheridan and Whyte once came to call at the house in Bedford Street, and there were watching for Johnson's return. Aided by an opera glass they could recognize him at quite a distance, and were amused to see him lumbering along, with that queer rolling gait of his, and laying his hand on *every* post he passed. If by chance he had overlooked one, he would return and rest his hand upon it a second and then resume his walk.

He also for a time had lodgings in the Temple. But the lodgings which seem truly associated with Johnson—his real homes—were the houses of Fleet Street or, rather, the houses in those little courts which opened into Fleet Street: Johnson's Court, Gough Square, and Bolt Court. The house in Gough Square is, in some ways, most closely connected with him, and is today the shrine to which pilgrims repair. To reach this, one should walk westward down Fleet Street, on the side opposite the Temple, until he comes to a narrow opening called Johnson's Court. Having turned up that passage, he will enter a square, Bolt Court,

from which there appears to be no outlet; but there is one at the far end, and through this a winding way leads to Gough Square. Here, at No. 17, the house still stands in which Samuel Johnson lived from 1748 to 1758 and compiled the Dictionary that brought him eternal fame. Here, too, "dear Tetty" died. To one side of the simple doorway is a plaque which reads:

Dr. Samuel Johnson
Author
Lived Here
B. 1709 D. 1784

The house belongs to Mr. Harmsworth, who preserves it with pious care and also allows the public to visit it. No. 17 is surrounded by an iron railing, protecting a tiny garden. The visitor enters a pleasant hall, hung with pictures which illustrate incidents in the life of Johnson and containing some pieces of good furniture, which are of his period, if they never belonged to him. Over the door is a closely leaded fanlight, and the door also has an ingenious fastening as a safeguard against burglary. Leading into the cellar are the steep steps up which Francis Barber had to trip, and Phelps thinks the steps in themselves furnish sufficient explanation of the reason for Barber's going to sea. Opening into this entrance hall is a room paneled in pine—a paneling which, though rough, has become a lovely rose-brown color. In this room are attractive windows with perfectly square panes and deep window seats. The room is filled with relics of Johnson, and many of his letters are here preserved under glass. On the second floor (in England called the first floor) there are two good rooms, the most attractive seemingly a drawing room. It is paneled and painted in cream and has a kind of Chinese molding about three feet from the floor. Quite evidently it was a lady's drawing room, but it seems a little difficult to associate it with "dear Tetty." There are many portraits of Mrs. Thrale in

the house, though Johnson did not meet the Thrales until after he had left Gough Square. On the next floor there is a large room containing many books dealing with Johnson, his friends, his times. Visitors are, under suitable conditions, allowed the great privilege of consulting these rare and delightful volumes. There are here many early editions of books which it is a joy to see and to handle. On a table are the two great brown folios of the Dictionary. But the crowning glory of the house is the attic, which stretches over the whole building. It has windows on three sides, in addition to a skylight over the stairs. In this room the Dictionary was compiled. There was plenty of room here for the "six amanuenses, five of them natives of North Britain." We can go to each window in turn and look out over the London that Johnson loved. Here is London, the heart of London. Here St. Paul's dome and golden cross, there the church towers that must be St. Sepulchre's—old houses, old roofs, romance. Phelps says: "If the spirit of our host ever returns to this house, I think he visits the room in which he 'tugged at the oar.' It is a good room in which to think and, clearing the mind of cant, to pray for some measure of the faith, courage, and honesty of Samuel Johnson."

It was to Johnson's Court that he moved soon after meeting Boswell, and here the Scotchman frequently visited him. In fact, Boswell was rather distressed when he found later that Johnson had left the place which bore his name, even though it was *not* named for him. Here Miss Williams lived on the ground floor and Mr. Levett in the garret, while on the floor between Johnson had his sleeping quarters and his study, with his untidy but well-worn folios. Here he read and wrote and planned, with more light and air than he had previously enjoyed in the Temple, where he had occupied rooms after leaving Gough Square.

Number 8, Bolt Court, has long been

torn down; else this also would be a shrine, perhaps more so than Gough Square, since it was here that Johnson spent the last seven years of his life, and here that he endured his last painful illness. Miss Williams had lived here before he did, while he lodged in Temple Lane, and Johnson would go every night to drink tea with her, which she always kept waiting for him, regardless of the hour. Here at Bolt Court he kept his cat, Hodge, for which he used to go out and buy oysters. Here on the ground floor poor blind Miss Williams served the tea, sounding the cups with her fingers to see whether they were full, to the great disgust of Miss Reynolds and Mrs. Thrale. Here was the little garden that the author of *Rasselas* loved; here were the book-piled rooms where he could think and fret and brood and storm as he liked. Here, near to the friendly roar of Fleet Street, which he loved, he was waited on by Frank Barber and the silent old surgeon, Mr. Levett. Here, we read in *Haunted London*, "used to sit the lawgiver of the club, hoarding up mysterious scraps of orange peel, eating veal-pie and plums till perspiration dropped from his forehead; sleeping late and then repenting it; praying, resolving, twitching, grunting, shaking his head, puffing, blinking, teasing Goldsmith and snubbing Boswell; in a word, turning out down the Court, wig hind before and stockings down, amid the clamour of boys and the wonder of chairmen, to hand Mrs. Montague or bewitching Miss Burney to her carriage." It was here, too, in a quiet room at the back on the first (second) floor of this vanished house that the Doctor died. Here to this quiet Court came Burke and Langton and others of the Club to bid farewell to the dying man; here Reynolds promised to read the Bible and not to paint on Sundays. Here, too, the old Doctor fully realized his condition and was glad to be told that his would be the honor of a burial-place in Westminster. In Bolt Court on Monday,

December 13, at seven o'clock, he, for whom Death had always held such terror, passed away so quietly that the watchers did not know that the end had come.

While his headquarters were largely in these grimy courts of Fleet Street, about half way between the spire of St. Bride's and the spire of St. Clement Danes, much of Johnson's real life was spent elsewhere: in the taverns and coffee houses or in the homes of his friends.

The Fleet Street section was alive with coffee houses and taverns. It is said that, all counted, there were thirty-seven coffee houses in this quarter during Johnson's day. And the Lexicographer was a familiar figure in many of these. He might be found at The Black Boy, in the Strand, opposite the Adelphi; he might be found at the Golden Anchor, at Holborn Bars; he was frequently found at Gray's Inn or Staple Inn. At the King's Head Beef-steak House in Ivy Lane, Newgate Street, Johnson organized his first club. The members were merchants, booksellers, physicians, and dissenting ministers. Here, while the steak spluttered, Johnson would beat down his adversaries with his conversational club, frequently talking more for victory than from conviction. At the Essex Head in Essex Street, in 1783, Johnson also organized a club which was much less known. This was done for the benefit of Sam Greaves, an old servant of Mr. Thrale. They met three times a week—"the terms low, the expenses light." He who missed forfeited two-pence. and each man was president in turn. Barry was a member, but Sir Joshua Reynolds would not join, being "afraid of Barry." Another haunt was the Queen's Arms in St. Paul's churchyard. Here the Doctor got a friend to form a city club of quiet men, not patriots. In this place Johnson dined the day Mrs. Thrale died, for he always dreaded solitude. But it was at the Turk's Head in Gerrard Street, Soho, that *the Club* was organized. Started by Reynolds and Johnson,

this was begun in 1764. It originally consisted of the members who met every Friday night for supper. Here Sir John Hawkins, that wrong-headed member, quarreled with Burke; here Goldsmith tried to elbow in his jokes; and here Reynolds shifted his ear-trumpet and took snuff. Hither came Johnson from his room in Johnson's Court or from his talk about the Hebrides with Boswell at the Mitre in Fleet Street. It was into this club that Boswell was taken after fidgeting all evening while talking to Lady Diana Beauclerk, for fear he should be rejected. At the Turk's Head, leaning over a chair as if over a pulpit, Johnson delivered to Boswell a mock charge as to his duties as a good fellow and a clubbable man. Here—despot and autocrat at the club meetings on Friday nights—the Doctor enunciated all his prejudices, his hatred of furious Frenchmen, Scotchmen, Whigs, Dissenters, or Fielding's novels, and his love of city life, of tavern, of club, and of *good haters*. Here he preached and thundered, teased Garrick, and confuted Gibbon, lamented Goldsmith's death, and railed at Wilkes. The permanent establishment of the Club, as Boynton says, "was as great as any of Johnson's achievements, for it marked . . . the complete emancipation of literature from fashion and the coming of a day when neither riches nor poverty could of themselves distinguish a member of the republic of letters."

Mitre Tavern in Fleet Street was one of Johnson's greatest haunts. In 1763 he seems to have been perpetually there. Boswell, writing later, said: "When I go up that quiet, cloistered court, running up like a little secure haven from the stormy ocean of Fleet Street, and see the Doctor's gnarled bust on the bracket above his old hat, I sometimes think the very waistcoat must still be impregnated by the fumes of seething punch bowls." At this time the Doctor used to leave his chambers in Inner Temple Lane, later pulled down, at four in the af-

ternoon and never go home again till two in the morning, afraid of solitude and the blue devils that lurked in the old Temple rooms, awaiting his return. The first time that Boswell and Johnson met at the Mitre it was by the arrangement of Bozzy, for he had heard that the Mitre was a place of frequent resort with the Doctor, who used to sit there late. Boswell, a young man about town, having determined to go to Utrecht and study law, wanted Johnson's advice about a course of study. Having been introduced to the Doctor at Davies the bookseller's, Boswell proposed a meeting at this same Mitre, with its curtained partitions and incomplete daylight. After a few days Bozzy met the Doctor going home to Inner Temple Lane at one in the morning. Unabashed, as ever, he proposed the Mitre, but Johnson replied kindly enough, "No, sir, it is too late. They won't let us in. But I'll go with you another night with all my heart." About a week later they met by appointment and went to the Mitre for supper. That night was the pride of Boswell's life, for Johnson took his admirer's hand and said, "Sir, give me your hand; I have taken a liking to you." Boswell speaks of the occasion with an almost *deifying* reverence: "The orthodox high-church sound of the Mitre, the figure and manner of the celebrated Samuel Johnson, the extraordinary power and precision of his conversation, and the pride arising from finding myself admitted as his companion, produced a variety of sensations and a pleasing elevation of mind beyond what I had ever before experienced." It was at this same low-browed tavern that Johnson made that dreadful remark to Mr. Ogilvey, the Scotchman: "The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road which leads him to London."

It is not far from the Mitre to Wine Office Court, where Goldsmith lived when he wrote a grammar for Newbery, the bookseller, and where Dr. Percy also dwelt.

Here, on the right hand, is the Cheshire Cheese, still standing, where in a certain window they point out Johnson's seat and also that of Boswell. Few today visit London without going to the Cheshire Cheese—some for the ale and famous steak, but most for its associations with Johnson.

Of almost equal importance with the coffee houses were the homes of Johnson's friends, where he was ever the honored guest and also the privileged one. We know of his freedom at the home of the Thrales, where he not only had a complete apartment where he could "growl to his liking" on his blue days, but also ordered what he liked for dinner. It was just a pleasant drive to Streatham down through Southwark and Brixton, especially after Blackfriars bridge was built in 1769 ("London" Bridge was long the only one, then Westminster was built in 1750), and Johnson took this drive often.

In Salisbury Square he used to visit Richardson, whose literary works he greatly admired. Here Hogarth heard Johnson denounce the cruelty with which Jacobites were treated and, judging from his rolling eyes and frothing mouth, took him for a madman. Always Johnson was accorded a warm welcome in the home of "little Garrick" on the Adelphi Terrace—looking out over what later became the London Embankment. There, even after Garrick's death in 1779, the wheezing old Doctor, together with such other friends as Hannah More and Fanny Burney, would go to cheer Mrs. Garrick's loneliness and share her luxurious dinners. He dines with the printer Strahan, dines at the Mitre, dines at Streatham, coquettes—in his lumbering way—with Mrs. Thrale, and goes home to the fogs and grime of Bolt Court. In 1870 he writes Mrs. Thrale:

"How do you think I live?—On Thursday I dined with Hamilton and went thence to Mrs. Ord. On Friday at the Reynoldses'; on Sunday at Dr. Burney's with

the two sweets (daughters of Mrs. T.) from Kensington; on Monday with Reynolds; today with Mr. Langton; tomorrow with the Bishop of St. Asaph. I not only scour the town from day to day, but many visitors come to me in the morning, so that my work (*Lives of the Poets*) makes little progress."

Among those friendships which Francis Barber mentioned to Boswell as being particularly comforting to Johnson in the days of sadness just after his wife's death, he speaks of Mrs. Ann Gardiner, wife of a tallow chandler on Snow Hill, "not in the learned way, but a worthy good woman." She had been introduced to Johnson by Mary Masters, a poetess, who had herself become acquainted with him when he was writing for Cave, for Miss Masters lived in Cave's home in St. John's Gate. He frequently dined at Mrs. Gardiner's on Snow Hill. In his Journal of Easter Day, 1777, he wrote, "I dined by appointment with Mrs. Gardiner, and passed the afternoon with such calm gladness of mind as it is very long since I have felt before." Yet on the morning of that day he had been "much distressed." Frederick M. Smith has taken these scraps of references to the "tallow chandler's wife," together with two or three brief extracts from Johnson's letters and from the letters of Miss Masters, with Hoole's account of Johnson's last days, during which Mrs. Gardiner was constantly in attendance to serve and comfort, and has given us a very charming picture of Johnson's friendship with this "worthy good woman." Of course the picture is largely imaginary in its details, but while reading it we feel that we have come closer to the real heart of Johnson than in all the pages of Boswell's *Life*. Boswell himself was highly pleased to be noticed by the great, and he liked to show that Johnson "loved a lord." Frederick Smith in this article has emphasized the fact that he also at times leaned toward simple things, and

yearned for homely virtues. After his well-cooked and neatly-served dinner at Snow Hill that Easter Day, that day on which he had been "much distressed" in the morning, he settled down in Mrs. Gardiner's immaculate little parlor, into which a sweet spring mildness entered through the open window, and peace fell upon him. He dozed and dreamed and muttered and, after his "forty winks," woke refreshed in mind and spirit and cheerily returned to Bolt Court to give Miss Williams an account of his day. Whatever value he set upon the aristocracy of birth, yet he could take his comfort—possibly his greatest comfort—among homely folk, and in such scenes we come nearer to a true understanding of the personality of the man.

In June, 1784, Johnson took his last dinner at the old Club with Reynolds and Burke and Langton and Boswell and others less known. After this it is mostly Bolt Court. Miss Williams is gone; so is Levett, his other old pensioner. Of the welcoming home-faces none remains but Frank Barber. Langton comes to see him, and Reynolds, though the sick man finds the ear-trumpet rather difficult to use now. Burke comes and shows a woman's tenderness; Boswell, before he goes north, bounces in and out, his assurance somewhat lessened by the genuine sorrows that hang over him; little Miss Burney rushes into the ante-room and stays there for hours; while Mrs. Gardiner, the tallow-chandler's widow, was there until the end, being the last to prepare food for him and seeing that nothing was neglected for his comfort. Thus, amid a circle of his friends from different walks of life, came the passing of Johnson's spirit.

Yet we can not think of that spirit as being far from London—his London—the London of which he said, "The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it." London would seem a suitable place for ghosts to walk,

and of all the city no spot more appropriate than the quaint, dark little courts and lanes opening into Fleet Street. There the careless, slovenly, physically unattractive, yet in many ways lovable man spent forty-seven years of his life—days of blended sunshine and shadow, melancholy and mirth—and here, when standing in Gough Square, one doubtless feels that his spirit yet lingers.

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VERGILIA P. SADLER

Whatever retrenchments are made in public education should be made by the friends of children, and not by those who would sacrifice the welfare of the schools to serve selfish ends or to promote their own political fortunes or those of their party, or who in this period of distress seek to gain temporary and cheap popularity with the over-burdened taxpayers by loudly denouncing the public school as costly and extravagant—to be led first to the sacrifice as the chief offender among our public institutions.—EDWIN C. BROOME