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The Wit of Samuel Johnson

Lead: Born in poverty in 1709, Samuel Johnson became England's premier eighteenth-century man of letters and was the author of the first great dictionary of the English language.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The son of a bookseller, Johnson early on developed a healthy appetite for reading but he was not a willing convert to scholarship. He later attributed his commanding knowledge of Latin to the severe beatings he

received at the hand of his master at Litchfield grammar school. Johnson spent thirteen months at Pembroke College, Oxford but had to leave because the money ran out. Back in Litchfield he attempted to start a school of his own, which failed, and he acquired a wife, Tetty Porter, a widow twenty years his senior. Their stormy years together became the source of his many clever observations on married life, such as this one, "if marriage is a struggle against the odds, remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience."

In 1737 they left for London and for many years Johnson eked out a living as a hack journalist, writing for hire. He felt that no man but a blockhead

ever wrote except for money. His opinion of his fellow journalists might be applied to any age when he said that, "London was filled with scribblers accustomed to lie."

Until he published his dictionary, he lived from hand to mouth, depending on the pitiful generosity of one patron or another. By the time he had himself been arrested twice for debt and watched a fellow poet die in debtors prison, he had learned thoroughly to hate patrons. He defined a patron as a "wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery." He spoke for scholars and artists throughout history who have struggled to live on the meager gifts of the wealthy when he said, "A patron is

a man who looks on with unconcern at a man struggling for life in the water, and when he finally reaches the bank, encumbers him with help."

With the publication of his dictionary, his struggle was over. The two-volume work was a triumph of selection and usually opinionated but witty definition. "Oats," he said were, "a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people." Samuel Johnson spent the rest of his life capitalizing on his fame and wit, living on a Crown pension of £300 a year. Research assistance for *A Moment in Time* is provided by Jason Vuic and Ed Harcourt. At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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