

A Note on Dr. Samuel Johnson and the Reception of Chaucer in Eighteenth-Century England.

William Snell

We open the volume of Prefatory lives, and to our astonishment the first name we find is that of Cowley! —What is become of the morning-star of English poetry? Where is the bright Elizabethan constellation? Or, if name be more acceptable than images, where is the ever-to-be-honoured Chaucer? Where is Spenser?

William Wordsworth, 1815, on Johnson's *Lives*¹

Towards the end of Samuel Johnson's life, it was announced that he would publish an edition of the medieval English author Geoffrey Chaucer's works, perhaps comparable to his monumental edition of Shakespeare (1765):

* In memoriam Professor Kaiho, a gentleman and a scholar; and Dr. J.D. Fleeman (1932-1994), late Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford: see Appendix. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my father, A.T. Snell, in researching this paper.

1 William Wordsworth, *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface to the Edition of the Poems*, (1815) in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. Knight, 2 vols., (1896), vol. 2, pp.247-8, quoted by Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism, 1357-1900* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960) 3 vols; vol. 2, p. 81. 'The morning-star of English poetry': here Wordsworth was possibly referring to Cibber's *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (1753). See Spurgeon, p. 406.

Chaucer, a new edition of him, from manuscripts and old editions, with various readings, conjectures, remarks on his language, and the changes it had undergone from the earliest times to his age, and from his to the present; with notes explanatory of customs, &c., and references to Boccace, and other authours from whom he has borrowed, with an account of the liberties he has taken in telling the stories; his life, and an exact etymological glossary.²

Johnson's biographer, the Scottish author and lawyer James Boswell (1740-95), describing the final illness which beset Johnson in November 1784 remarks that 'It is truly wonderful to consider the extent and constancy of Johnson's literary ardour, notwithstanding the melancholy which clouded and embittered his existence. Besides the numerous and various works which he executed, he had, at different times, formed schemes of a great many more.'

Among these 'schemes' was the proposal for an annotated edition of Chaucer's works mentioned above. Indeed, Johnson had come close to such a project much earlier, in 1777, when he was approached by three publisher friends who proposed that he should write short prefaces and lives to an edition of the English Poets. Johnson was intrigued by the idea. His *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* as they are familiarly known—although the original title was *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*—appeared between 1779 and 1781 in the format their title suggests: as prefatory material to a large collection of the works of around fifty poets.

The prefaces wanted by the publishers were to be elegant and accurate

2 Extract from a catalogue of publications projected by Johnson at different periods printed in Sir John Hawkins' *Life of Johnson* (1787), p. 82, and Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.* (1787), vol. iv, p. 405. See Boswell's *Life of Johnson* ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) vol. iv, p. 381.

accounts of the English poets of reputation, ‘from Chaucer to the present time’.³ Perpetual rights were no longer valid for most of the poets, and an initial estimate suggested the project would total approximately one hundred volumes. This was too much for the publishers, so they reduced the plan to cover only the period between 1600 and the time of writing. They then culled this down further by excluding all living poets, as they were concerned that sales might be harmed by what Johnson had to say about the authors. This finally reduced the edition to 68 volumes, of which 56 contained poetry, but unfortunately nothing from Chaucer.⁴

As Caroline Spurgeon notes, Johnson quotes rarely from Chaucer in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): indeed, he expresses in his preface that

I have been cautious lest my zeal for antiquity might drive me into times too remote, and crowd my book with words now no longer understood. I have fixed Sidney’s work for the boundary, beyond which I make few excursions.⁵ (emphasis mine)

Thus for ‘Reeve’ he cites Dryden, for ‘Chanticleer’ Camden on Chaucer, and for ‘Manciple’, Betterton’s *Miller of Trumpington*, rather than quote directly from Chaucer himself. However, for ‘Welkin’ and ‘Shall’ (‘the faith I shall to God’), and probably for a few other words, he does quote from Chaucer.⁶ Thomas

3 See Edward Dilly, Letter to James Boswell, Southill, Sept. 26, 1777 quoted in Birkbeck Hill, vol. iii, p. 110.

4 See Alvin Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U. P., 1987), p. 270.

5 Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. 411.

6 Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. 411.

Betterton (1635? - 1710) was an actor and minor playwright who in old age befriended the adolescent Pope and urged him to write drama. Two translations, *The General Prologue* (1712) and *Reeve's Tale* (1712), were probably written by Pope, and Johnson among other authorities matter-of-factly attributed both to him.⁷

But there may have been other reasons for Johnson's omission of Chaucer: his publishers, of course, had pecuniary considerations. The books had to sell and this was after all the Augustan age, that literary period in eighteenth-century England noted for refinement and classicism when literary men of the middle ages were divided between 'goths' and 'vandals'; and Chaucer was a 'Goth'.⁸ Thus we could interpret the exclusion of Chaucer as being for other reasons: because he did not consider him to be a 'proper' poet. Indeed, Spurgeon goes so far as to state that for Johnson 'English poetry began with Waller,⁹ and earlier writers (with a very qualified exception of Shakespeare) were not worthy of serious attention.'¹⁰

The history of the reception of Chaucer in England in the eighteenth century

7 Betsy Bowden, *Eighteenth-Century Modernizations from the Canterbury Tales*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991) p. 3: see Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill (1905) vol. iii, p. 88. 'He [Pope] seems or have regarded Betterton with kindness and esteem; and after his death published, under his name, a version into modern English of Chaucer's Prologues, and one of his Tales, which, as was related by Mr. Harte, were believed to have been the performance of Pope himself by Fenton &c.' See Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. 457.

8 Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. xiv.

9 Edmund Waller, poet and politician (1606-87)

10 Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. xlv.

11 See, for example, William L. Alderson and Arnold C. Henderson, *Chaucer and Augustan Scholarship* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1970).

has been well documented,¹¹ such as the translations or ‘modernizations’ for which Dryden and Pope set the precedent. Much earlier, Caxton had attempted an edition of the *Canterbury Tales* in 1483, followed by Wynken de Worde, 1498; Richard Pynson’s edition of Chaucer’s *Works*, was followed at some point by William Thynne, 1532; then John Stow 1561; and Thomas Speght, 1598, later published by Adam Islip and George Bishop in 1602 as *The Workes of our ancient learned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer, Newly Printed*, which, the seventh edition of Chaucer’s Works and second edition, edited by Speght, was revised and edited by Thynne’s son Francis, and is the earliest in which thorough punctuation was attempted.

John Dryden (1631-1700), the first of the great English neo-classical poets, much admired Chaucer, whom he regarded as the founder of English verse, an equal to the great poets of classical antiquity. At the end of his life Dryden produced *The Fables* (1700), translations of works by Ovid and Chaucer. His Preface is famous for its appreciative criticism of Chaucer—‘Here is God’s Plenty’ has become the ultimate characterization of Chaucer’s art. Dryden translated *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, as well as the Parson’s portrait from the General Prologue. The poet also translated ‘*The Flower and the Leaf*’, which he regarded as one of Chaucer’s finest compositions. Later readers shared Dryden’s admiration for this work, and it was one of the most popular poems in the canon until the late nineteenth century, when W.W. Skeat demonstrated that it was not by Chaucer (indeed, it was probably written by a woman) and excluded it from his authoritative Oxford Chaucer.¹²

Dryden’s paraphrases were published the year he died and exactly three

12 Walter W. Skeat ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1900)

hundred years after Chaucer, and are the first modernizations ever made from the *Canterbury Tales*. Nine years later Alexander Pope ‘received his first thirteen guineas from Jacob Tonson for imitations and paraphrases including “ye Tale of Chaucer” modernized’.¹³

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) first published a modernization of the Merchant’s Tale in 1709 and his Wife of Bath’s Prologue in 1714. Pope was the first author to take full advantage of Britain’s ‘Copyright Act’ of 1709 – the first such in the world.¹⁴ At least seventeen known and anonymous authors produced thirty-two modernized versions of the *Canterbury Tales* during the eighteenth century, along with tale links and adaptations of each other’s work. This is not to mention those by Pope and Dryden.

Johnson, however, was unflattering about Dryden’s ‘renovation’ (‘what the Italians call *réfacimento*, a renovation of ancient writers, by modernizing their language’) of Chaucer. He writes in his *Lives of the English Poets*, that the ‘Tale of The Cock’ [Nun’s Priest’s Tale] ‘seems hardly worth revival’ and continues:

... and the story of Palamon and Arcite [Knight’s Tale], containing an action unsuitable to the times in which it is placed, can hardly be suffered to pass without censure of the hyperbolical commendation which Dryden has given it in the general Preface ...¹⁵

The dilemma of the then literary scholars and readers alike, which continued into the nineteenth century and later, was whether to excuse or condemn, and

13 Bowden, p. x.

14 See Bowden, footnote to p. x.

15 Quoted by Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. 456.

also censor, the ribald or salacious passages in Chaucer such as those in the Miller's Tale. For example, one published version of the Miller's Tale (1791) is known to survive which contains a preface justifying the tale's overt sexuality, whereas William Lipscome (1754-1842) in his 1795 edition justifies in its preface the exclusion of the Miller and Reeve's tales.¹⁶ Attitudes to Chaucer's 'bawdy', his reputation for humour, sexuality, and interest in country people and animals, was an attitude which may have been cultivated in the eighteenth century.¹⁷

Johnson does not seem to have had any personal connection with those contemporary authors who brought out their own interpretations of Chaucer's works such as John Markland (1701-1736?) – The Shipman's Tale (1721); Friar's Tale (1723), or George Ogle (1704-1746) – The Clerk's Prologue and Tale (1739), although Boswell, as we shall see, owned a copy of Ogle's *Canterbury Tales*.

Two months after the death of Samuel Johnson saw issued 'A catalogue of the valuable library of books of the late learned Samuel Johnson Esquire, L.L.D.' This catalogue of books sold at auction following Johnson's death, at Christies in London (Wednesday, February 16th, 1785), reveals that Johnson possessed only one edition of Chaucer: Urry's (see Fig. i below). John Urry (1666-1715) was a friend of the antiquarian Thomas Hearne and one of a number of scholars who undertook research into Anglo-Saxon and early English. His edition of

16 Bowden, p. x.

17 For a typical example of the attitude to Chaucer in that period see Spurgeon, vol. 1, p. 449: from *An Account of Chaucer* (1777), author unknown: 'We find in them [Chaucer's works] tales full of pleasantry, simplicity, and licentiousness... The imagination which dictated them was sharp, chearful and fruitful, but not well regulated, and very often too obscene. His stile is disgraced by a number of obscure and unintelligible words.'

was the first to be printed in Roman type, not Gothic, and included *The Tale of Gamelyn*, *The Pardoner and the Tapster* (an account of what happened after the pilgrims reach Canterbury), and *The Second Merchant's Tale*, or *Tale of Beryn*—none of which have been attributed to Chaucer!

215	2. Chillingworth's works, 1727.	Nicholson's historical libraries	1736. <i>Walden</i>
216	4. Hale's placitorum coronæ, 2 v. 1736. Hawkin's pleas of the crown, 1716.	Fortescue de legibus Angliæ	1663. <i>Urry</i>
217	Stow's survey of London, 2 v.		1754. <i>Urry</i>
218	Spelman's works		1723. <i>Urry</i>
219	Campbell's doctrine of the middle state		1721. <i>Urry</i>
220	Chaucer's works, by Urry		1721. <i>J. Walker</i>

Græc. Lat. &c.

(Fig. i)

The Rev. Henry John Todd [1763-1845] writing in his introduction to *Johnson's Dictionary* of 1818 pointed out that 'Dr. Johnson has copied both the poetry and prose of Chaucer from the edition of Urry in 1721, which Mr. Tyrwhitt, the last accomplished editor of the poet's *Canterbury Tales*, pronounces most incorrect . . .'.¹⁸ Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730-1786), writing four years after Urry's death, in 1721, stated the opinion that

The strange licence, in which Mr. Urry appears to have indulged himself, of lengthening and shortening Chaucer's words according to his own fancy, and of even adding words of his own, without giving his

¹⁸ See Spurgeon, vol. 2, p. 109.

¹⁹ *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer: to which are added an essay on his language and versification, and introductory discourse, and notes and Glossary, by Thomas Tyrwhitt* (London: J. Nisbet, 1860), vol. I, p. xx.

readers the least notice, has made the text of Chaucer in his Edition by far the worst that was ever published.¹⁹ (emphasis mine)

The catalogue which appeared of Boswell's library at Sotheby's on Tuesday, May 24th, 1825, and the following nine days, reveals that he was in possession of 'Chaucer's Complaint of the Black Knight' by Dart (1718) and Ogle's *Canterbury Tales* (1737) (see Fig. ii). He had also owned a copy of Tyrwhitt's two-volume *Canterbury Tales* (1798), in addition to Islip's 'black letter' *Chaucer's Works* of 1602. (See Fig. iii)²⁰

96	537	Characteristic Sketches of some of the most distinguished Speakers in the H. of Commons (<i>not published</i>)	1808	
4	538	Charles the Second's Account of his Preservation after the Battle of Worcester	1766	
11	539	Chaucer's Complaint of the Black Knight, by Dart	1718	
11	541	----- Canterbury Tales, by Ogle	1737	
11	542	Cheating Gallant (The) or the False Count Brion	1677	
11	643	Cheitomius (M. P.) Voces Græco Barbara Novi Testamenti	Amst. 1649	

(Fig. ii)

56	605	Cellini (Benvenuto) Vita	Colonia,	
1	606	Cervantes' Don Quixote, by Shelton (<i>imperfect</i>)		
2	607	----- (M. de) Comedia (Quatro)		
12	608	Chaucer's (Geof.) Canterbury Tales, by Tyrwhitt, port.	Oxford, 1798	
		2 vol.		
13	609	Chapman's (G.) Monsieur D'Olive, Lond. W. Holmes	1606	
14	610	----- Warres of Pompey and Caesar, a Tragedy	1631	

(Fig. iii)

20 Donald D. Eddy, ed. and intro., *Sale Catalogues of the libraries of Samuel Johnson, Hester Lynch Thrale (Mrs. Piozzi) and James Boswell* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Books, 1993). Figs. i, ii, and iii are taken from this, pages 30, 229 and 234, respectively.

Tyrwhitt's edition first appeared in 1775, and is now considered a major landmark in the history of Chaucer editorial history, establishing an authoritative text based on the most reliable source material. However, Johnson was most probably unfamiliar with it. Before Tyrwhitt, Chaucer had been popularly known, but as an old barbarous author with plenty of good sense but no art of language (see footnote 17 above).

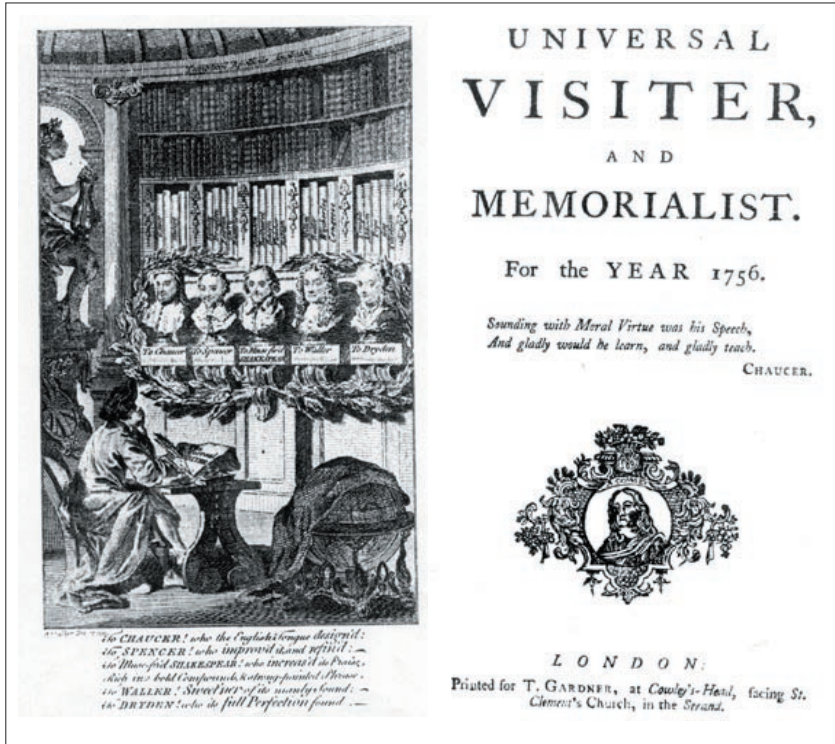
Though the genius of Dryden had discovered the classical spirit of Chaucer's imagination, the form of his poetry remained obscure and defaced till Tyrwhitt explained it. The art of the grammarian has seldom been better justified than in Tyrwhitt's great contribution to medieval scholarship.²¹

Tyrwhitt was the 'restorer' of Chaucer, in that he was responsible for bringing readers back to the original text, which Augustan and later scholars had increasingly veered away from, with their imitations and 'modernizations'.

It has been suggested that Johnson might have been the author of an 'Account of the life and writings of Chaucer' which appeared in *The Universal Visitor, and Monthly Memorialist* for January, 1765 (see Fig. iv).

Johnson, along with actor-writer David Garrick (1717-79) and Thomas Percy (1729-1811, author of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765)) had agreed to contribute to the monthly magazine edited by Christopher Smart and Richard Holt after the inception of Christopher Smart's period of insanity, which began in late 1755 and seemingly ended in the spring of

21 George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, revised by R. C. Churchill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 1970), p.448.



(Fig. iv)

1756. The contributor's names were not included, but it has been surmised that according to symbols included in hand-written notes by the owner of one copy contained in the British Library, one 'Ann Gardner' who might have known Dr. Charles Burney, a good friend of Smart, Garrick and Samuel Johnson, that the writer of the article was Johnson.²² Two asterisks were apparently used to indicate those sections authored by Johnson, but only three of the seven items thus indicated have been confidently attributed to

22 Roland B. Botting, 'Johnson, Smart, and the Universal Visiter', *Modern Philology* Vol. 36 (Feb. 1939) no. 3: 293-300.

him.²³

Johnson's own observation on this episode in his literary career both witty and revealing:

I wrote for some months in *The Universal Visiter*, for poor Smart, while he was mad, not then knowing the terms on which he was engaged to write, and thinking I was doing him good. I hoped his wits would soon return to him. Mine returned to me, and I wrote in *The Universal Visiter* no longer.²⁴

That we can reject the theory that Johnson was responsible for the piece is cause for relief, as its gross inaccuracies would only serve to mar the reputation of that eminent man. One of the absurd claims made is that as a result of Chaucer's affiliation with his patron the 'duke of Lancaster',²⁵ being 'too much ... entangled in affairs of state to be happy', and having been 'in compliance with him in all his ambitious designs' Chaucer was

... obliged to abandon his native country, and to take refuge in Zealand, where he was reduced to the utmost distress, remittances from his own

23 Boswell dismissed the possibility that Johnson was responsible for the article. See Birkbeck Hill, vol. 1 p. 306: 'Christopher Smart . . . Was one of the stated undertakers of this miscellany [*The Universal Visiter*], and it was to assist him that Johnson sometimes employed his pen. All the essays marked with two *asterisks* have been ascribed to him, but I am confident, from internal evidence, that of these, neither "The Life of Chaucer," "Reflections on the State of Portugal," nor "An Essay on Architecture," were written by him.'

24 From Boswell's *Life*, quoted by Botting, p. 293.

25 John of Gaunt (1340-99), son of Edward III.

26 Donald D. Eddy, ed. and intro *The Universal Visiter*, (New York: Garland, 1979), p. 10.

estate being stopt by the means of some persons, who had been greatly obliged to him.²⁶

There follows the preposterous assertion that when he returned to England, he was ‘detected, arrested, and sent prisoner to the tower, by the king’s command’!

To conclude, without failing to mention the poet, Johnson was evidently unsympathetic to Chaucer, and it cannot be regretted that any plan by Johnson to carry out a new edition of Chaucer’s works did not come to fruition. As Caroline Spurgeon writes, ‘The attitude of the great dictator was not favourable to Chaucer ... he rarely mentions him, and when he does, he is not sympathetic.’²⁷ That Johnson envisaged a new edition of Chaucer’s works might suggest that he felt a need to make recompense for neglecting the poet. However, had he relied solely on Urry’s edition it would have proved a sorry rival to Thyrwitt’s. Language (the ‘unintelligible words’ – see footnote 17) was probably the great barrier to be breached, and that great master of the English tongue Johnson alas little understood the nature of Middle English:

Mr. Johnson told me an odd thing today: Robinson, the Primate of Ireland,²⁸ has said to Mrs. Montague that there was a district not far from Dublin called Dingle where the people still spoke the old English

27 Spurgeon, vol. 1, p.xiv.

28 Richard Robinson (1709-94), Archbishop of Armagh and brother of Sir Thomas Robinson. See *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776-1809* ed. Katharine C. Balderston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 342; also Birkbeck Hill, vol. iii, p. 254.

language: and says he they will even to this hour take up Chaucer and laugh at what we cannot understand. Now see said Mr. Johnson how little wit is wanted to lye with. The language of Chaucer was never the common language of the multitude, not could people of the rank he mentioned ever understand it. Chaucer was written in the High Court dialect of his time, and even at that time totally unintelligible to the vulgar.²⁹ (emphasis mine)

Appendix:

From:
DR. J. D. FLEEMAN

PEMBROKE COLLEGE
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Telephone (0865) 276444

Dear Mr. Snell,

Sun. 10 April 1994

You will perhaps be astonished to receive this letter, but I have recently received a most kind and friendly letter from your son William, and I cannot neglect to let you know of it and to recall an occasion (as he did) when you brought him to Pembroke College some time in the late sixties, on a Johnsonian pilgrimage.

His present appointment in Japan has brought him in touch with a handful of my own Japanese Johnsonian friends, and their reminiscences reminded him of his visit to the college when still a schoolboy. You will perhaps be

²⁹ August 1778: S. C. Roberts, *An Eighteenth-Century Gentleman, And Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 46.

disappointed that he has not picked up a total devotion to Johnson, but he evidently has done well in his chosen field, and you must be pleased with his professional advancement and his continuing love of books. As a medievalist he is at least involved with the earlier forms of books, though alas, he will find it hard to acquire many copies from those days.

Since your visit to Pembroke most of my own professional career has passed: at the time of your visit I was perhaps about the same age as your son is now, but in recent years my health has suffered various setbacks, and this academic year will see my retirement after 29 years as a college tutor. I cannot without some exaggeration claim to have enjoyed every minute of it, but I have certainly enjoyed almost every day, and I find it hard to contemplate the future without my regular encounters with the young. They have frequently been annoying and even contumacious, and of late they appear to be woefully ill-read; but it was my job to try to remedy that, and at least they are full of energy and interest, and when forced to think they produce some pretty remarkable performances.

The last 30-odd years have been devoted to the compilation of a bibliography of Johnson, and that is now with the Oxford University Press, and I am ambitious enough to hope that it may see the light of day by the end of this year, though it is a biggish book (2 vols; about 1200 pages in all), and size will slow things down. I have a summer of proof-reading to look forward to, and am busily engaged in preparing an index. I was myself a pupil of L.F. Powell who revised Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell, and compiled the whole volume of Index for it, so I dare not skimp on the task: the old man's shade sits at my shoulder rather like Captain Flint, and insists on the checking and rechecking of each item. It is slow work, but as Johnson remarked of the *Dictionary*, 'I like that muddling work' (my main fear is that

it may turn out to be muddled work).

Your son tells me that you have yourself acquired a good collection of Johnson over the years, and I have to confess a mixture of apprehension and pleasure in the news, for as a bibliographer I am always and increasingly terrified that something entirely new will turn up which I have missed from the record, or that yet another copy of a scarce item suddenly comes to light. Bibliographers dream of perfection, and this world does not allow for it. Indeed, as to dreaming, I have often had bad dreams of visiting a bookseller's shop, and looking at the bottom shelf (as all collectors know, that is the place to make a discovery, rather than at eye-level), and finding a tiny *Rasselas* which I have never seen before: of late I even dream of the publisher's name and the date ... waking up after that is a considerable relief.

With all good wishes

Yours Sincerely,

David Fleeman