

# James Boswell

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**J**ames Boswell's enduring fame is as the biographer of Dr. Johnson, but he is of great interest on his own account. He spent much time in and around Fleet Street, where he met with Dr. Johnson and a wide circle of the leading literary figures of the day.

Boswell had swarthy skin, black hair and dark eyes and was of average height. He suffered all his life from periodic bouts of melancholia.

He did not get on well with his father, and he felt that his Calvinist mother was cold towards him. At the age of thirteen, he went to Edinburgh University for 5 years. He then went to Glasgow University, where he attended the lectures of Adam Smith. While at Glasgow, he decided to convert to Catholicism and become a monk. His appalled father ordered him home, but Boswell ran away to London where he spent three months as a libertine, before being taken back to Scotland.

He was re-enrolled at Edinburgh, and was also induced by his father to put his inheritance under trusteeship in return for an allowance of £100 a year. This was raised to £200 a year when he passed his oral law exam, and he was then permitted to return to London.

Boswell had already started to keep his very idiosyncratic diary, in which he resolved to record absolutely everything. He was very conscious of his need for self-improvement, and tried to account for his periodic bouts of melancholy. This meant that he recorded all his numerous sexual encounters, usually accompanied by resolves to desist in future, and also verbatim accounts of many of his conversations. Both activities set him apart from most diarists at the time and since.

Boswell practiced law in Edinburgh for over a decade. He usually spent his annual break in London, meeting Johnson and many other writers, editors, and printers. He finally moved to London in 1784 in the hope of improving his legal career, but had little success.

It is one of the great lucky accidents of history that the Boswell papers were passed down from heir to heir, first in Scotland and then in Malahide



*James Boswell*

Castle in Ireland, without being read or mentioned by the owners, because of the embarrassing reputation of the subject. But in 1927, Ralph Isham, an American bibliophile, bought them. Boswell first met Doctor Samuel Johnson in 16 May 1763, so the journal before then is concerned with his rather aimless life, trying to persuade the Countess of Northumberland and other noble acquaintances to procure for him a commission in the Foot Guards, spending time with his slightly disreputable Scottish friends, and seeking sexual gratification with prostitutes or actresses. Boswell's London Journal was written every day from 15 November 1762 to 4 August 1763. In 1928, it was thought by Mr. Isham to have been irretrievably lost, but it was accidentally discovered in 1930, and added to the other Boswell papers. The Journal was written on loose quarto sheets, which were bundled up at the end of each week and sent to a colleague to read.

Boswell married his cousin Margaret in 1769; they had four sons and three daughters. She remained faithful to him till her death in 1789, despite his frequent visits to prostitutes, each one provoking a promise to reform.

One of Boswell's best-known books is his Journal of a tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson LL.D. Johnson was then in his mid-60s. The book records a trip which started in Edinburgh in 1773, and passed through St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Inverness, and thence to Skye, Coll, and Mull, returning by way of Boswell's estate at Auchinleck.

Johnson published his account of this trip in 1775. Boswell's account was published after Johnson's death in 1784. Both are still widely read and enjoyed; Boswell's account is the more gossipy, and succeeds because of his keenness on detail.

It was to some extent a trailer for his Life of Samuel Johnson which he prepared from the detailed diaries he kept throughout the time he knew Johnson.

He attempted to stand for Parliament, but could not gain the necessary support. So he concentrated on his the Life of Johnson, which was published in 1791

During this time, his health deteriorated due to excessive drinking and further bouts of venereal disease. He died in Great Portland Street, London in 1795

In 1949, Ralph Isham sold Boswell's papers to Yale University, who have been publishing them ever since. But for this strange sequence of events, our knowledge of Boswell's life would have been very sketchy.



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## Additional notes

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Additional notes: Boswell's London Journal gives an extensive account of his first sexual encounter in London with an actress called Louisa and covers his 40-day courtship and precipitate parting in January 1763

The conversation when Boswell first met Dr. Johnson is well known

[Boswell] "Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it."

[Johnson:] "That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help.

The background to this exchange is less apparent now than it would have been at the time.

There was an added political dimension: In 1761, William Pitt the Elder resigned as leader of the House of Commons having successfully prosecuted the Seven Years War. When the Government fell in 1762, George III had installed his favourite, Lord Bute, a Scottish peer, as Prime Minister with instructions to bring the unpopular war to an end. There was much criticism on how this was accomplished

Sources and further reading: Wikipedia articles on James Boswell, Boswell's London Journal, both with extensive lists of sources and further reading (The Louisa episode): <https://www.jacklynch.net/Texts/louisa.html>