

JOHNSON, BOSWELL, AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

It is particularly appropriate, I think, to be talking about Johnson and slavery here in Dr. Johnson's House in Gough Square. It is here, in the spring of 1752, that Johnson received Francis Barber into his household – the ten-year-old slave from Jamaica who would be part of Johnson's life for the next thirty-two years, no doubt galvanizing much of Johnson's thinking about slavery and ultimately becoming for Johnson much more a surrogate son than a servant. In fact, we have some evidence that in this very room, the gallery where Johnson and his amanuenses compiled the famous Dictionary, young Francis Barber sat among them, dutifully practicing his handwriting on scraps of paper, perhaps waiting to be assigned small tasks and errands.

The story of Johnson's response to slavery has survived only in bits and pieces, haunted by errors and omissions for more than two hundred years. Even those readers with a sense that Johnson hated slavery usually know little more than sound bytes – “Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies” and “How is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negroes?” The majority of people know nothing at all about it, or worse, aware that Johnson was a white male high-church Tory, assume the worst of him. Even some “experts” get it dead wrong. At the beginning of the 20th century, for example, a writer in the Encyclopedia Britannica matter-of-factly stated that Johnson had been [quote]

“opposed to the anti-slavery movement.”¹ One hundred years later, Johnson still suffers from false impressions and misrepresentations. Just last year, a major scholarly book about the British abolition movement declared that in the 18th century, “No major thinker defended slavery, but few spent real effort attacking it” and then gave Johnson as the definitive example: “Samuel Johnson once scandalized an Oxford dinner party by toasting ‘the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies,’ but he never went much further in devoting his formidable literary energy to slavery.”²

It doesn’t help that Johnson’s two most important anti-slavery texts, his 30-page denunciation of the European conquest of Africa and beginnings of the slave trade, published in 1759 under the bland title an “Introduction” to The World Displayed, and his legal brief against slavery written on behalf of the African Joseph Knight in 1777, have been left out -- for reasons unknown -- of the definitive Yale Edition of the Works of Johnson. Indeed, neither text has been reprinted in any collection of the works of Johnson since the 18th century. Little wonder that Johnson’s anti-slavery views are not well known, as one can scarcely know what one cannot read. Even the great Johnsonian scholar, the late David Fleeman, in his otherwise invaluable *Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2000), clouds the issue in his book by labeling the anti-slavery legal brief not as Johnson’s but “Boswell’s Petition for Joseph Knight.”³

¹ Article on “Edward Gibbon,” vol. 11, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 32 vols. (New York, 1910).

² Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), p. 86.

³ J. D. Fleeman, *Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), vol. 2, p. 1333. Fleeman does go on in the main entry, however, to refer to the text as “Johnson’s argument” and to note that Boswell “was not himself engaged in the hearing [about Knight’s suit for freedom]”.

What I mean to do this evening is simply to recount the highlights of Johnson's fierce, lifelong opposition to slavery, while also examining the extent to which the subject is overlooked, minimized, or omitted altogether at various points in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. What I want to suggest, ultimately, is that the story of Johnson on slavery is essentially a story Boswell never told.

The first thing to note is how early Johnson expressed his views about racial slavery. In mid-1740, very early in his London writing career, Johnson presented within his serialized *Life of Francis Drake* an extraordinarily sympathetic depiction of the maroons (or "Symerons"), the escaped slaves whom Drake found in the 1570s living in the wilds of Caribbean islands, Central and South America, and on whom he depended so greatly for his success. Johnson describes them, tellingly, as "fugitive Negroes, who, having escaped from the tyranny of their masters in great numbers, had settled themselves under two kings." Johnson reveals the radical basis for his hatred of slavery as he applauds the maroons' assertion of their natural rights and their pursuit of bloody vengeance against their former masters: "[They] not only asserted their natural right to liberty and independence, [he writes] but endeavoured to revenge the cruelties they had suffered, and had lately put the [Spanish] inhabitants of Nombre de Dios into the utmost consternation."⁴ Throughout Johnson's narration of Drake's first voyage to the Caribbean, the theme of maroon heroism pushes forward. The former slaves are represented as worthy and indispensable allies, their moral and martial qualities equal, in many places superior, to those of Drake's little troop of adventurers.

⁴ "Life of Drake," *The Works of Samuel Johnson L.L.D.*, ed. Arthur Murphy (London, 1792; repr. 1796), XII, 67-68.

In 1744, Johnson's anti-slavery views again pushed through, this time in a section of his "Life of Richard Savage." There, having focused his praise on the anti-imperialist themes of Savage's 1737 poem "Of Public Spirit," Johnson singles out for particular attention one 20-line section of the poem – the only lines, it should be noted, that Johnson chose to quote from hundreds in the original poem. After a short plea for humane treatment of the American Indians, the passage culminates in these lines denouncing -- with a fervor that Johnson obviously shared -- the African slave trade:

Why must I *Afric's* sable Children see
Vended for Slaves, though form'd by Nature free,
The nameless Tortures cruel Minds invent,
Those to subject, whom Nature equal meant?
If these you dare, albeit unjust Success
Empow'rs you now unpunish'd to oppress,
Revolving Empire you and yours may doom,
(*Rome* all subdued, yet *Vandals* vanquish'd *Rome*)
Yes, Empire may revolve, give Them the Day,
And Yoke may Yoke, and Blood may Blood repay.

Here again, Johnson's commentary is most revealing. Glossing a poem in which Savage prophecies, and seems almost to invite, a bloody slave insurrection, Johnson praises the poet for being willing "to censure those Crimes which have been generally committed by the discoverers of new Regions, and to expose the enormous Wickedness of making War upon barbarous Nations because they cannot resist"

and for having “asserted the natural Equality of Mankind, and endeavoured to suppress that Pride which inclines Men to imagine that Right is the Consequence of Power.”⁵ Both the sympathy for violent rebellions and the specific vocabulary of natural equality among the races would recur in many of Johnson’s later utterances on the slavery question.

In 1749, Johnson was so moved by the story of a former slave he encountered that he was to retain the memory for decades, citing it in a piece of writing he composed almost thirty years later. According to accounts that made all the London papers and were published in Johnson’s own *Gentleman’s Magazine*, in the mid-1740s the son of an African king had been entrusted to a British sea captain, to be carried to London for his education. But the treacherous captain, once at sea, threw the prince and his companion into chains, and sold them as slaves in the Caribbean. Eventually, complaints of this treachery reached the Admiralty office, which arranged for the young men to be freed and brought to London, where, under the protection of Lord Halifax, they had by early 1749 begun to pursue their education after all. The event which made them famous in the press, and which Johnson may well have witnessed in person, took place on February 1, 1749 at Covent Garden theatre, when the two recently liberated Africans attended a performance of *Oroonoko*. One of the most popular plays of the 18th century, *Oroonoko* tells the tragic story of an African prince, entrusted to a British sea captain for transport to England for his education, who is betrayed into slavery and transported to Surinam, where he is reunited with his beloved Imoinda, now also a slave; leads a massive

⁵ *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage* (London, 1744), quoted here from the 2nd ed. (London, 1748), reprinted in *Early Biographical Writings of Dr Johnson*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (Farnborough, England: Gregg International, 1973), p. 320.

slave insurrection that ends in slaughter and tragedy; and ultimately, having for love's sake slain Imoinda (pregnant with their child), fails in his own suicide attempt, is recaptured and slowly tortured to death. Here, according to the Gentleman's Magazine, is what happened in the audience that evening:

[The two Africans] seeing persons of their own colour on the stage, apparently in the same distress from which they had been so lately delivered, the tender interview between Imoinda and Oroonoko, who was betrayed by the treachery of a captain, his account of his sufferings, and the repeated abuse of his placability and confidence, strongly affected them with that generous grief which pure nature always feels, and which art had not yet taught them to suppress; the young prince was so far overcome that he was obliged to retire at the end of the fourth act. His companion remained, but wept the whole time; a circumstance which affected the audience yet more than the play, and doubled the tears which were shed for Oroonoko and Imoinda. (Feb. 1749, pp. 89-90)

This episode registered in Johnson's psyche so forcefully that decades later, when in composing his legal argument on behalf of the African slave Joseph Knight he was groping for a potent example of the absolute injustice of slavery, he conjured up from memory the ordeal of these Africans in the 1740s: "In our own time," Johnson wrote, "Princes have been sold, by wretches to whose care they were entrusted, that they might have an European education; but once they were brought to a market in the plantations, little would avail either their dignity or their

wrongs.” (Life, III, 202) In these and other examples we can see that well before the arrival of Frank Barber in his life in 1752, Johnson had developed strong views on the immorality of racial slavery.

What is perhaps more important to stress about these instances in the 1740s of slavery becoming evident in Johnson’s thought and experience is that none of them is discussed, or even mentioned, in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. While it is easy to engage in what one of my colleagues calls “Boswell-bashing” and it is always difficult to prove a negative, there is a pattern to these omissions that extends over Boswell’s coverage of the whole of Johnson’s life. Here it might be best to simply survey the list of all those instances, from the 1750s until Johnson’s death in 1784, in which Boswell – whether through lack of information, lack of interest, or some other motive – failed to include a significant event or relationship, or to discuss a particular piece of writing, that exhibited Johnson’s ongoing hatred of slavery. The list includes:

- In 1756, in the “Preface” he wrote for Rolt’s *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, Johnson pointed out the slave trade – he calls it “the traffic in negroes” -- as the paradigmatic example of a trade practice that is intrinsically and universally (in his words) “unlawful in itself.”⁶

⁶ Johnson, “Preface” to Richard Rolt, *A Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1756), reprinted in *Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces* (London, 1774), vol. 3, p. 288.

- **Also in 1756, in the first issue of his new *Literary Magazine*, Johnson paused to denounce 18th-century Jamaica as “a place of great wealth and dreadful wickedness, a den of tyrants, and a dungeon of slaves.”⁷**
- **In 1759, the “Introduction” to the *World Displayed*, a 30-page historical essay Johnson wrote to introduce a multi-volume collection of voyages (beginning with Columbus) but which Johnson, perhaps to the surprise of the publishers, used as a vehicle to recount and condemn the Portuguese conquest of Africa, the racist attitudes underlying their murderous cruelty, and their commencement of the slave trade in the mid-1400s. He also cites the parallel in his own time to what he calls the “the English barbarians” of the Caribbean, the slave masters who abuse African slaves in the thousands “because they scarcely considered them as distinct from beasts.”⁸**
- **In November 1759, Idler 81, Johnson’s condemned at length (in the voice of an American Indian) the European conquest of America and the racist views of the conquerors who, once they with “the sword and the mines . . . [had] destroyed the natives, [supplied] their place by human beings of another colour, brought from some distant country [i.e., Africa] to perish here under toil and torture.”⁹**

⁷ Johnson, “An Introduction to the Political State of Great-Britain,” *The Literary Magazine*, vol. 1 (1756), p. 4.

⁸ [Johnson], “Introduction,” *The World Displayed*, vol. 1 (London, 1759), printed in *Samuel Johnson’s Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen Hazen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), p. 221-237. See also Basker, “Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery,” *The New Rambler: Journal of the Johnson Society of London* (serial no. E VI. 2002-2003, pub. Sept. 2003), pp. 36-48.

⁹ *Idler* 81 (November 3, 1759), *The Idler and the Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 253.

- **In December 1759, *Idler* 87, in which Johnson criticizes colonial slavery when he remarks that “of black men the numbers are too great who are now repining under English cruelty.”¹⁰**
- **In December 1759 Johnson’s article in the *Critical Review* about John Hawkesworth’s newly published version of *Oroonoko*, in which Johnson focuses his discussion on the passages that sharpen the anti-slavery thrust of the play.¹¹**
- **In May 1760, Johnson’s decision to join Dr. Thomas Bray’s Associates, a charitable organization whose members contributed to support missionaries and schools in the British colonies devoted to educating black children, free and enslaved.¹² Johnson remained a member of Bray’s Associates to the end of his life, some 24 years. Among his close friends who were also members and, significantly, all of them also anti-slavery advocates, were James Oglethorpe, Dr. William Heberden, George Strahan, and Bennet Langton.)**
- **In 1764, Johnson’s review of James Grainger’s poem *The Sugar-Cane*, in which he publicly chastises his friend Grainger for placidly discussing the slave trade “without the least appearance of detestation” and for giving readers tips on how to select and buy slaves “with the same indifference that a groom would give instructions for chusing an horse.”¹³**

¹⁰ *Idler* 87 (December 15, 1759), *The Idler and the Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 270.

¹¹ *The Critical Review; or, Annals of Literature*, 7 (Dec 1759), 480-86. See also Fleeman, *Bibliography of Johnson*, I, 999 and Basker, “Intimations of Abolitionism in 1759: Johnson, Hawkesworth, and *Oroonoko*,” *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, vo. 12 (2001), pp. 47-66.

¹² Maurice J. Quinlan, “Dr. Franklin Meets Dr. Johnson,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (January 1949), pp. 34-44.

¹³ [Johnson], “*The Sugar-Cane*,” *Critical Review*, vol. 18 (Oct. 1764), pp. 276-77. See also Basker, “Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery,” p. 40.

- **By the 1760s, Frank’s apparent use of Johnson’s home as a kind of African Meeting House, as reported by an eye-witness from Cambridge who called round in 1765 and discovered one of Frank’s all-black meetings in progress in the front parlor.¹⁴ These took place when Johnson was living just around the corner from Gough Square, in Johnson’s Court, though today a plaque is all that is left to mark the site of his house.**
- **From an unknown date, probably the 1770s, Johnson’s friendship with Ignatius Sancho, the former slave who was actually born in the hold of a slave ship in 1729. Such was Johnson’s esteem that when Sancho died, Johnson promised to write his biography. (Because of ill health, however, he never did.)¹⁵**
- **In 1775, in Taxation No Tyranny, Johnson endorsed a proposal (distantly foreshadowing Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation) “that the [American colonists’] slaves be set free, an act which surely the lovers of liberty cannot but commend. If they [ie, the freed slaves] are furnished with fire arms for defence, and utensils for husbandry, and settled in some form of government within the country, they may be more grateful and honest than their masters.”¹⁶ Many Americans and their supporters, including Johnson’s former acquaintance Benjamin Franklin, were enraged, and denounced Johnson for seeming to incite slaves to rise up and slaughter the whites.**

¹⁴ Baptist Noel Turner, letter of October 17, 1818, printed in *The New Monthly Magazine*, reprinted in John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, VI, 147.

¹⁵ *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Penguin, 1998), pp. ix and 119.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Donald Greene, vol. X of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 451.

- **In July 1776, in a letter to Boswell, Johnson expressed approval for Mansfield’s Somerset decision of 1772 and urged it as a precedent for other slavery cases. The Somerset judgment found that a slave was de facto free once landed on British soil, a ruling Johnson enthusiastically recommended to lawyers representing Joseph Knight in his quest for freedom in the Scottish Courts in the late 1770s. Boswell printed this letter in the *Life*, but without a word of comment on this landmark case, its significance to Johnson, or why he might have cited it.**¹⁷
- **In 1784, just weeks before his death, Johnson’s created a special bequest that the proceeds from a book of his Prayers and Meditations, to be published posthumously with the editorial help of George Strahan, go to Dr. Bray’s Associates. Within a year of Johnson’s death, the project had generated revenues of about £47 for the charity to use in its overseas educational efforts for black children.**

All of these represent moments in Johnson’s life and work where Boswell had an opportunity to open up and investigate Johnson’s views on racial slavery, or to foreground the significance of slavery to Johnson and his contemporaries, even fleetingly. He pursued none of them, overlooking or omitting them all. Whether consciously or not, Boswell steadily kept the topic slavery out of view.

But is it possible I am being too ‘presentist’? Might not a modern person ask: Why should Boswell have made an issue of Johnson and slavery? Wouldn’t he have shared the assumptions of his age, that slavery was a legal and universally accepted institution? Didn’t everyone in Boswell’s time approve of, or at least acquiesce in,

¹⁷ Johnson letter to Boswell, July 2, 1776, *Life of Johnson*, vol. 3, p. 87.

slave-based economies, and enjoy their products? Whatever Johnson's moral misgivings about slavery, couldn't Boswell's indifference be explained by the fact that there was nothing particularly controversial about the subject?

The problem is that Boswell, more than almost any other man in Britain, was deeply aware of the public outcry and political struggle then welling up against slavery, in precisely the years that he was writing, revising, and printing the *Life of Johnson*. It is little remembered even by scholars that Boswell was present at the birth of the abolition movement, at an historic dinner party in London in May 1787, recorded in considerable detail by Thomas Clarkson in his *History of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* (1808). The party was hosted by Johnson's friend Bennet Langton at his house in London and had been deliberately set up, by Clarkson and Langton, to persuade the guest of honor, William Wilberforce, to lead the legislative effort in Parliament to abolish the African slave trade. Clarkson gives us this account of what happened when he arrived that evening at Langton's house:

"I found the party [to] consist of Sir Charles Middleton, Mr. Wilberforce, Mr. [Isaac] Hawkins Browne, Mr. [William] Windham, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Mr. Boswell. The latter was then known as the friend of Dr. Johnson, and afterwards as the writer of his *Tour to the Hebrides*. After dinner, the subject of the Slave-trade was purposely introduced. Many questions were put to me, and I dilated upon each in my answers, that I might inform and interest those present as much as I could. They seemed to be greatly impressed with my account of the loss of seamen in the trade, and with the little samples of African cloth, which I had procured for their inspection. Sir Joshua Reynolds gave his unqualified approbation of the

abolition of this cruel traffic. Mr. Hawkins Browne joined heartily with him in sentiment; he spoke with much feeling upon it, and pronounced it to be barbarous, and contrary to every principle of morality and religion. Mr. Boswell, after saying the planters would urge that the Africans were made happier by being carried from their own country to the West Indies, observed, “Be it so. But we have no right to make people happy against their will.” Mr. Windham, when it was suggested that the great importance of our West Indian islands, and the grandeur of Liverpool, would be brought against those who should propose the abolition of the Slave-trade, replied, “We have nothing to do with the policy of the measure. Rather let Liverpool and the Islands be swallowed up in the sea, than this monstrous system of iniquity be carried on.”[*] While such conversation was passing, and when all appeared to be interested in the cause, Mr. Langton put the question, about the proposal of which I had been so diffident, to Mr. Wilberforce, in the shape of a delicate compliment. The latter replied, that he had no objection to bring[ing] forward the measure in parliament, when he was better prepared for it, and provided no person more proper could be found. Upon this, Mr. Hawkins Browne and Mr. Windham [MP’s themselves] both said they would support him there [i.e., in Parliament].”¹⁸

Beneath this passage, Clarkson added a rather striking footnote about Boswell’s and Windham’s later change of heart. The note reads: “I do not know upon what grounds, after such strong expressions, Mr. Boswell, in the next year [i.e.,

¹⁸ In chapter 10 of Thomas Clarkson, The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament (London, 1808), reprinted by Frank Cass and Company, Ltd., 1968, vol. 1, pp. 252-254.

1788], and Mr. Windham, after having supported the cause for three or four years [i.e., 1790 or 1791], became inimical to it.”¹⁹

By the time of that dinner party in May 1787, Boswell had been writing the first draft of the *Life of Johnson* for ten months, having started in July 1786. He would still be at work on the manuscript, composing and revising it, two years later when, after a nationwide petition drive that generated more than 500 petitions bearing the names of 390,000 British people (more than the number of eligible voters)²⁰ and enormous press coverage, William Wilberforce, on May 22, 1789, formally introduced the Abolition Bill in Parliament. He spoke for three hours straight, in a speech that Edmund Burke, who was present, described as “equal to anything he had ever heard of in modern oratory.”²¹ The debate over abolition would continue in the press and in parliament for another two years, leading up to the climactic vote in May 1791. During these same two years Boswell was finishing the manuscript of the *Life of Johnson*, revising and submitting copy to the printers, and proofreading the typeset sheets, as the book moved toward publication on May 16, 1791 – the anniversary of the day on which Boswell’s first met Johnson in Tom Davies’s book shop.

By juxtaposing these two progresses – of the newly born Abolition movement, and the text of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* – one can see it is impossible that Boswell could have been unaware of the growing national controversy over

¹⁹ Clarkson, p. 253.

²⁰ Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p. 230.

²¹ Edmund Burke, quoted in “Debate on Mr. Wilberforce’s Resolutions Respecting the Slave Trade,” *The Parliamentary History of England, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (London, Printed by T. C. Hansard, for Longman, et al, 1816), vol. XXVIII, p. 68.

slavery. I want to suggest instead that Boswell was so attuned to the public debate about abolition that at times he shaped the *Life of Johnson* to influence it.

To pursue this idea for a moment, I want to turn to an instance in the *Life of Johnson* where, even as Boswell seems to address the topic of Johnson on slavery, he controls the narrative and colors the rhetoric in ways that actually foreclose further discussion and prevent readers from gaining any real understanding of Johnson's anti-slavery views. The passage is Johnson's famous toast at Oxford, an episode that Boswell presents in one sentence: "UPON ONE OCCASION, WHEN IN COMPANY WITH SOME VERY GRAVE MEN AT OXFORD, HIS TOAST WAS, 'HERE'S TO THE NEXT INSURRECTION OF THE NEGROES IN THE WEST INDIES'"²²

Immediately one notices all that Boswell does not give us here: the source for the anecdote; the date, even the decade; the name of the college where it happened; the names of people present; their reactions, anything else at all from the conversation that evening, or afterwards. How uncharacteristic of Boswell, the biographer who could devote 15 pages to a single dinner party such as Johnson's famous evening with John Wilkes.²³ Why wasn't Boswell interested in this extraordinary episode? Why didn't he ask his source for more detail? Or turn to others? Boswell knew key figures at Oxford whom he could have pursued for help, many of them longtime Johnson friends such as Thomas Warton at Trinity, William Adams at Pembroke, and above all Nathan Wetherell, Master of University College,

²² *Life of Johnson*, vol. 3, p. 200.

²³ *Life of Johnson*, vol. 3, pp. 64-79.

where, because of Johnson's frequent residence throughout the 1760s and '70s, the toast is most likely to have taken place.²⁴

Nor does Boswell connect the toast with any of Johnson's other expressions of serious support for slave revolts. Yet, as we've seen, on several occasions – in the *Life of Drake*, the *Life of Savage*, *Taxation No Tyranny* – Johnson seemed to endorse violent resistance as a legitimate, even admirable, response to the depredations of slavery. Did these comments escape Boswell's attention or slip from his memory?

Still, one might ask, what could Johnson really know about slave insurrections? Boswell says here that Johnson was always "very zealous against slavery," but that he displayed "zeal without knowledge." One word hints at the real extent of Johnson's knowledge and another context that Boswell might have explored, but didn't: the word NEXT, as in "the next insurrection." Johnson's tone makes it clear he is familiar with slave insurrections as an ongoing phenomenon, and expects others to follow. Where might he have formed such an idea? From literature? Perhaps works such as Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1695), Defoe's *Captain Singleton* (1720), or Thomas Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757), all of which depict slave insurrections, shaped Johnson's thinking? Or news reports? During the years 1737 to 1773, Johnson's own *Gentleman's Magazine* published more than fifty articles

²⁴ Such is the tradition at University College, as reported in a personal conversation with Dr. Robin Darwall-Smith, Archivist of University College, July 2005, who locates the insurrection toast in the room now known as the Winter Common Room. See also Boswell's correspondence with Warton, Adams, and Wetherell while gathering material for the *Life of Johnson* from 1784 to 1793 in *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Relating to the Making of the Life of Johnson*, ed. Marshall Waingrow (Yale University Press, 2nd ed., 2001), pp. 10-11, 18–21, 68-70, 91, 99, 102-103, 110,115-16, 122, 116-17, 121-123, 165, 166, 243-44. Other Oxford friends of Johnson whom Boswell consulted in gathering material for the *Life* include Herbert Croft, William Scott, and Sarah Adams; see pp. 24, 64-65, 123-24, 169-70, and 336-339.

about 43 different slave rebellions, in places ranging from the coast of Africa, across the Atlantic, to the Caribbean and throughout the Americas. They didn't all lead to tragedy either. Some actually succeeded, as Johnson well knew from the existence of freestanding maroon communities, whether those in Francis Drake's time or the Jamaican maroons of his own day. Indeed, the success of the Jamaican maroons in gaining independence from the British was being reported and discussed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the late 1730s, the very time when Johnson was beginning his long career as writer and editor with the magazine.²⁵ Who knows what role, behind the veil of anonymity, Johnson may actually have had in collecting, editing, or even composing some of the articles about slavery that appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* during these years?

Instead of pursuing such leads, Boswell stripped the episode down to an almost self-parodic sound bite, adding a touch of caricature with the phrase "very grave men" (most Oxford fellows in the 18th century were in their twenties and anything but grave) and leaving us with something that feels like a Hogarthian set-piece. He embeds the toast in a jumbled paragraph spiked with language that further precludes Johnson's comment from being taken seriously. We hear a sequence of charged phrases -- "very zealous against slavery," "zeal without knowledge," "violent prejudice," "yelps for liberty" -- that make Johnson sound unbalanced, over-excited, almost comic -- anything but a serious moral commentator. In the stream of quotations that Boswell strings together, he gives us Johnson as a dancing bear, blurting out wild and offensive remarks, proceeding to a

²⁵ Basker, "'The Next Insurrection': Johnson, Race, and Rebellion," *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, vo. 11 (2000), p. 38-39.

sudden non sequitur in which he insults “respectable” public figures such as Beckford and Trecothick for having Caribbean accents. And then Boswell deftly distracts us, chasing the red herring about who speaks proper English until the original topic of slavery disappears completely. In the end, the reductive and disarming effects of Boswell’s presentation encourage readers to see the scene as merely a charming, colorful eruption, characteristic of the eccentric Johnson and ultimately no more significant than similar outbursts about Lord Chesterfield, Scotsmen, or women preachers.

Finally, I’d like to turn to a part of the Johnson anti-slavery story that Boswell did tell, but belatedly, and in a way that prevented it being any help to the abolitionist campaign whose birth Boswell had witnessed, and whose growing strength in the late 1780s and early 1790s he had come to detest. This part of the story begins back in the 1770s, with the Joseph Knight case, in which the African slave Knight spent four years fighting for his freedom in the Scottish courts. Johnson became aware of the case through Boswell, whose friend John Maclaurin was representing Knight in the Scottish Court of Session. Maclaurin knew and admired Johnson. Using Boswell as intermediary, he asked Johnson to help by contributing a legal brief on behalf of Knight. This Johnson did in September 1777, dictating to Boswell some tightly phrased legal arguments that were transcribed and carried back to Maclaurin, who expressed his gratitude and drew on them for his final efforts on behalf of Knight.

Johnson’s legal brief contains some of the most cogent, uncompromising statements Johnson ever made about slavery. He argues from natural law that

slavery could only have entered human history through violence: thinking back to prehistory, it is “very difficult,” says Johnson, “to imagine how one would be subjected to another but by violent compulsion.” The same is true of Joseph Knight’s enslavement in the present day. In Johnson’s words, Knight “is certainly subject by no law, but that of violence, to his present master; who pretends no claim to his obedience, but that he bought him of a merchant of slaves, whose right to sell him was never examined.” Johnson condemns slavery as intrinsically “injurious to the rights of mankind, because whoever is exposed to sale is condemned to slavery without appeal; by whatever fraud or violence he might have been originally brought into the merchant’s power.” Johnson protests against racism as the real basis for slavery: “The laws of Jamaica afford a Negro no redress,” he writes. “His colour is considered sufficient testimony against him.” And Johnson is absolute in his convictions on this issue: “It is to be lamented that moral right should ever give way to political convenience.”

Given all this, and the fact that Johnson’s legal brief has been around at least in manuscript since 1777 and in print since the 1790s, you can imagine my surprise when a few years ago I went back to check the exact wording of the text in the first edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791). It wasn’t there! Instead, having mentioned that Johnson had dictated “an argument in favour of the negro,” Boswell apologizes in a footnote: “This being laid up somewhere amidst my multiplicity of papers at Auchinleck, has escaped my search for this work; but, when found, I shall take care that my readers shall have it.”²⁶

²⁶ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, (London, 1791) [first edition], vol. 2, p. 174.

Several factors, all circumstantial, invite the suspicion that Boswell deliberately “lost” Johnson’s anti-slavery argument at just the historic moment when it would have attracted most attention and helped boost the abolitionist cause. By keeping it hidden, Boswell prevented anyone – newspaper editors, abolitionist campaigners, MP’s in parliament -- from quoting or reprinting it, and thus disseminating not only Johnson’s very forceful arguments against slavery, but the image of Johnson himself as a prominent, respected, high-church, establishment abolitionist, rather than a radical or a Quaker or some other figure from the social and political fringe – as most of them were, and as all of them were being depicted by the pro-slavery lobbyists.

First, in all the hundreds of pages of printed text, drawn from thousands of leaves of handwritten draft, letters, notes, and other manuscript material, this is the only place in the Life of Johnson where Boswell reports that he has mislaid a document. Also, even leaving aside the faltering grammar in the footnote (perhaps a telltale sign of uneasiness), it is striking that Boswell, having noticed that the document is missing, knows so specifically where it actually is – hundreds of miles away, among his papers in Scotland. Could he not have sent to Auchinleck for it? Or written to his old friend John Maclaurin in Edinburgh, who had the original copy, and who might also have found a copy among his colleagues or in the court records? And why did Boswell not even mention the outcome of the case on which, by a vote of 10-4 , the Court ruled that there was no such thing as slavery in Scotland and that Joseph Knight (and by extension, all blacks in Scotland) were free men?

Second, by 1790 at least (as early as 1788, according to Clarkson), Boswell had become an ardent defender of the slave trade. So ardent that in mid-1790 he began writing what would eventually be a 24-page poetic satire on the abolitionist movement, including crude and puerile lampoons of the movement's parliamentary supporters such as Wilberforce, Windham, Burke, and Pitt. [see handout]. Just a few lines of this long-forgotten and embarrassing poem are enough to give its flavor:

Noodles, who rave for abolition
Of *th'Africans improv'd condition*,
At your own cost fine projects try;
Don't *rob--from pure humanity*.

Go, W[ilberforce], with narrow skull,
Go home, and preach away at Hull,
No longer to the Senate cackle,
In strains which suit the Tabernacle;
I hate your little wittling sneer,
Your pert and self-sufficient leer,
Mischief to Trade sits on thy lip,
Insects will gnaw the noblest ship;
Go, W[ilberforce], be gone, for shame,
Thou dwarf, with a big-sounding name.

In a later section of the poem, Boswell moves from ad hominem attacks to a defense of slavery based on an early version of “the happy negro” myth propagated by so many other apologists for slavery in decades to come:

Lo then, in yonder fragrant isle
Where Nature ever seems to smile,
The cheerful *gang!*--the negroes see
Perform the task of industry:
Ev'n at their labour hear them sing,
While time flies quick on downy wing;
Finish'd the bus'ness of the day,
No human beings are more gay:
Of food, clothes, cleanly lodging sure,
Each has his property secure;
Their wives and children are protected,
In sickness they are not neglected;
And when old age brings a release,
Their grateful days they end in peace.

But should our Wrongheads have their will,
Should Parliament approve their bill,
Pernicious . . . th'effect would be . . .²⁷

[Quality of the verse redolent of Dr. Seuss meets the Ku Klux Klan?]

Boswell had been composing this satire since the fall of 1790, but he was so acutely aware of the climactic debate coming up in Parliament in the spring of 1791 that he consciously timed its publication date to try to influence the outcome. "I am thinking to curtail my poem on the Slave Trade," he wrote to his friend William

²⁷ [Boswell], No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love (London, 1791), pp. 7-8 and 21-22.

Temple on April 2, 1791, “and throw it into the world just before the great question comes on next Wednesday.”²⁸ In the same letter Boswell tells Temple “My Life of Johnson is drawing to a close. I am correcting the last sheet, and have only to write an Advertisement, to make out a note of Errata, and to correct a second sheet of contents.” With tactical precision, Boswell’s published his anti-abolition pamphlet on April 16, and the debate began in Parliament on April 18.²⁹

Boswell’s careful timing in relation to political developments makes it all the more noteworthy that the text of Johnson’s anti-slavery brief did not finally make it into print until July 1793, more than two years later, and then buried in the “Addenda” to the second edition of the Life, issued after the book was printed and tucked into some copies almost like an afterthought. By that time, Wilberforce’s abolition bill of 1791 had been voted down and, when revived in 1792, eviscerated with a “friendly” amendment making abolition “gradual,” with the result that nothing actually happened to curtail the slave trade until new legislation was passed in 1807, fifteen years later. And yet, despite the subsidence of the abolitionist threat, when Boswell did finally print Johnson’s brief for Joseph Knight, he still felt compelled to counter Johnson’s anti-slavery argument with a rambling rebuttal almost as long as the legal brief itself. In these passages, Boswell’s Life of Johnson sounds more like a pro-slavery political pamphlet than the biography of the greatest literary figure of the 18th century.

²⁸ Boswell to the Reverend William Temple, April 2, 1791, Letters of James Boswell, ed. Chauncey Brewster Tinker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), vol. 2, p. 433.

²⁹ The Correspondence of James Boswell with Certain Members of the Club, ed. Charles N. Fifer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Appendix 1, p. 418, nn. 1 and 2.

Would Johnson's voice have made a difference? Speculations about what might have been ("counter-factuals" as the historians call them) are unreliable and unprovable, but nonetheless alluring. Johnson's brief on behalf of the slave had many useful legal arguments grounded both in common law and natural law. His moral arguments are even more compelling. He had supported a successful cause, a court case that effectively abolished slavery in Scotland and offered a precedent others could cite elsewhere. And Johnson had many admirers in public life, both among his fellow Tories and across the political spectrum, as well as a huge proportion of the general reading public.

We will never be able to measure the precise effect of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* on the course of history, but there are some suggestive signs. The absence of Johnson's legal brief against slavery in the first edition of the *Life* has meant that many modern editions inadvertently leave it out also, and such canon-shaping titans as the Norton Anthology of English Literature have only recently, since the late 1980s, begun to include it. We can only imagine how far that omission has prevented generations of readers gaining awareness of Samuel Johnson as an abolitionist over the past 200 years.

The causes and effects of political history are even murkier. Charles Sumner, the 19th century abolitionist senator from Massachusetts who pushed for emancipation in America, quoted Johnson on slavery in Senate speeches of the 1860s.³⁰ But would members of parliament have cared about Johnson's views in 1791 or 1792? Certainly some would have. In 1792, during the debates over whether

³⁰ Sumner, 4 June 1860, "The Barbarism of Slavery," in *The Works of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1875-83), vol. 5, p. 53. See also Sumner's speech of 23 February 1865, "No Bust for Author of Dred Scott Decision," *Works*, vol. 9, p. 291.

to go to war against France, the parliamentary record shows that Johnson was quoted in speeches by at least one member on each side of the question. But on the abolition bill, we simply cannot say, finally, how many might have been swayed by Johnson, or with what effect.

One thing we can measure, however, and it is very sobering. Given that by the 1790s British ships were carrying an average of 100,000 Africans per year as slaves to the new world, we can estimate that the postponement of abolition from 1792 to 1807 resulted in an additional 1.5 MILLION people going into bondage who would not have otherwise. Who can say what tiny mite Boswell's actions may have added to the complex forces that led to this massive and terrible outcome?

The vagaries of politics and the accidents of history aside, Johnson himself did in the end what he could do. In his final will and testament, he bequeathed the bulk of his estate to Francis Barber, payable as a steady income of £70 per year. Johnson's lawyer and biographer John Hawkins was publicly indignant, criticizing Johnson for exhibiting what Hawkins called "ostentatious bounty and favor to negroes."³¹ Perhaps Johnson meant it to be just that, knowing that his fame would insure that his bequest would be widely publicized. And indeed within days of his death at least 13 different papers and magazines reprinted it in full. But today we are more likely to call what Johnson did for Francis an act of enlightened philanthropy, perhaps even of reparation. Once again, even in death, Johnson the moralist showed us the way.

³¹ Hawkins's remark is quoted in the Birkbeck Hill and Powell edition of The Life of Johnson, vol. 4, p. 404, note.

James G. Basker

Richard Gilder Professor of Literary History

Barnard College, Columbia University