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A DAY WITH JOHNSON at the CHESHIRE CHEESE

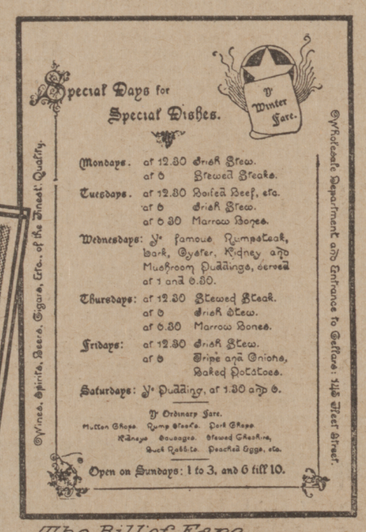
By George Seibel

Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.

Dr. Johnson's Birthplace, Lichfield

A.Y.H.

The Main Hall of the Cheshire Cheese



The Bill of Fare at the "Cheese"

Dr. Johnson's Corner in the Cheshire Cheese

Two hundred years will have passed on next Saturday, September 18, since Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield, England. He was the son of a second-hand bookseller. As a schoolmaster he taught young Garrick, destined to be England's greatest actor; and after many vain efforts to make a living he landed in London with a tragedy and two-pence half-penny in his pocket. His prodigious learning was paralleled only by his miserable poverty. He was as alert of mind as he was slothful in body. His many works—essays, biographers, poems, romance, and the famous Dictionary—are mostly literary curiosities; but the "Life of Johnson," by James Boswell, is one of the classics of English Literature. Johnson's influence upon his age was enormous. He died in 1784 and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

London town contains no more interesting survival of olden days than the Cheshire Cheese, a quaint eighteenth century tavern in Wine Office Court, where the mighty Dr. Johnson is said to have held forth. The faithful, who have bought one of the long pipes known as church wardens, are conducted through the paneled hall and across the sanded floors and are shown the "identical" chairs which Johnson and Goldsmith used to occupy. Johnson's seat was always in the window, and Goldsmith sat on his left, and a proper amount of faith can discern them still, sipping their stout, puffing away at their pipes, and holding forth in mighty disputations while waiting for the beefsteak pie, which is still the peculiar glory of the establishment.

While the faithful are thus devoutly following in the footsteps of the master, the skeptical are laughing at the gullibility of the human race, and the knavery of landlords. It is glibly asserted that the Cheshire Cheese is a bald fake, and the scoffers point out that it is never once mentioned in the many tomes of Boswell, who overlooked nothing. Nor has George Birkbeck Hill, the greatest of Johnsonians, whose edition of Boswell is the greatest edititon of anything, established the claim of the Cheese's landlord. Another diligent antiquary, named Cyrus Redding, has come to the rescue, however, asserting that he had conversed with Fleet street tradesmen who had actually seen the Doctor in the building.

This saves the landlord's face. He is absolved from being the tool of a syndicate to humbug and fleece credulous and liberal Americans. The "Old Curiosity Shop," which is pointed out as Dickens', is no doubt a fake, but it is quite possible that Dr. Johnson did often drop in at the Cheese. The Johnson Club has set its seal of approval upon the tradition by holding its meetings occasionally at the Cheese, on which occasion the presiding officer duly sits in Johnson's place, and who would "mock at an ancient tradition, begun upon an honorable respect?"

Besides, a modern poet namesake of the doughty Doctor's—poor Lionel Johnson, whose tragic death reads like one of Maupassant's or Stevenson's "crawlers"—has written a poem about Johnson and the Cheshire Cheese, which ought to settle the matter, since "poetry has a wider truth and a higher aim than history," according to Aristotle.

THE THRONE OF FELICITY.

So, peeping in through the door of the left-hand room on entering the hall of the Cheese, we may fancy that we see the Doctor's portly shade, seated in his accustomed chair, on the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, which occurs this week, holding forth to his cronies with the imperious volubility of old, the most delihtful of all conversational dictators.

"Did you ever hear me preach?" Coleridge once asked Lamb. "I never heard you do anything else," was Lamb's reply, and it fits Dr. Johnson, too. Leaning back in his seat, he announces his text in ponderous gravity, in the words he used to Hawkins: "Sir, a tavern chair is the throne of human felicity."

"That's a sentiment most convivial, but not quite orthodox," ventures Boswell, drawing forth a tablet from his cuff and preparing to note down the great man's reply.

"Sir," he proclaimed, "there is no private house in which people can enjoy themselves so well as at a capital tavern. . . . At a tavern you are sure you are welcome, and the more noise you make, the more trouble you give, the more good things you call for, the welcomer you are. No servants will attend you with the alacrity which waiters do, who are incited by the prospect of an immediate reward in proportion as they please. No, sir; there is nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn."

Then the tankards are raised, and a stentorian chorus of congratulations reminds the Doctor again that this is his two-hundredth birthday.

And the Doctor, not one whit disconcerted by the interruption, continues his harangue. How mine host of the "Cheese" would be gratified to hear his hostelry praised at the expense of Clifton's eating house, in the Butcher Row, where he had met a most uncivil person. This must have been that bellicose Hibernian with whom Johnson got into a dispute "concerning the cause of some part of mankind being black." The Irishman grew "so warm and intemperate in his expressions" that Johnson walked away. As a parting shaft the irate disputant declared that he had "a most ungainly figure, and an affection of pomposity, unworthy of a man of genius."

"BOSWELL'S ONLIE BEGETTER."

"Here comes Tom Davies," said Goldsmith, as the door opens and another jovial comrade joins the circle. In an aside to Garrick, Goldsmith adds: "Tom Davies threw Boswell at Johnson for a whim and he stuck like one of the burrs of his native land." We that are peeping may feel grateful to Davies, actor and bookseller, for that whim gave to the world the greatest of all biographies, and made the insignificant Boswell among biographers what Homer is among poets and Gibbon among historians.

But Tom Davies doesn't look at all jolly tonight—quite out of place in that assemblage—and presently the reason is revealed. He holds a volume in his hand, his finger inserted between the pages to mark a place, and he says to Garrick: "Have you seen the slur of that pestilent poetaster Churchill?"

"Why should he read such fellows' drivel," interjects Johnson, "when he has your own life of himself to read?"

"Hark, ye!" says Davies, and reads as follows:

"With him came mighty Davies. (On my life
That Davies hath a very pretty wife!)
Statesman all over—in plots famous grown—
He mouths a sentence as curs mouth a bone."

"Console yourself," says Johnson; "you know the same fellow has made sport of me in his poem of 'The Ghost,' because of the spectral visitations in Cock Lane. I'd have my revenge, sir, if I were you, by leaving the stage."

"Egad, I will," mutters Davies, morosely.

"Here's cheer for all," quoth Johnson again as the beefsteak pie was brought in. "While I have writ in the Rambler what I think of gulosity or excessive voracity, I have myself inherited a healthy appetite from the days when I practiced the art of living in a garret at 18 pence a week. There is a time of life, sir," he continued, turning to Burke, "when a man requires the repairs of the table."

For a while the peeper hears nought but the clatter of knives and forks upon plates, and sounds which indicate that Fletcherian mastication is no new thing under the sun.

HE SCOURGES THE SCOTS.

"Is not such a beefsteak worth a cauldron of your Scotch oatmeal?" inquires the Doctor of the sedulous Boswell. "I have often remarked that the oats which we feed to our horses in England are devoured by Scotchmen."

"Some one might answer you aptly, sir," ventures Boswell, with timidity, "that for this reason England breeds such fine horses and Scotland such fine men."

"None, of that sir, to me," thundered Johnson. "Fine men, indeed! Such creatures as your atheistical Hume. I had quite an altercation with Adam Smith about that very son of Belial. He would insist that Hume is a good man. I confuted his argument by telling him plainly 'You lie, sir!' But he is so abnormally sensitive that he flared up at this, and we discontinued our amicable disputation."

"Yet you must allow my native land some merit," protests Boswell.

"Indeed, sir, I do," asserted Johnson, "for when I was in Edinburgh I did see a sight that pleased me mightily."

"What was that?" inquired Boswell.

"The road to London, sir," comes Johnson's crushing retort.

MUST HAVE HIS TALK OUT.

Someone arises and makes ready to go. "Sit down, sir!" commands the Great Cham of Literature, as Smollet termed Johnson. "Sit down, sir! You remind me of John Wesley. John Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do."

The restless one sits down and Dr. Johnson has his talk out.

Has anyone ever talked like the Doctor? In all the taverns about Fleet street—Leigh Hunt conjectured that he had sipped port in every one—he held forth, as Boswell says, to "persons the most widely different in manners, abilities, rank and accomplishments." At least a dozen taverns are associated with the Doctor's table talk. He talked voluminously, wisely as a rule and always well. His common sense was his chief characteristic in conversation, whether it be true or not, as Adam Smith told Boswell that Johnson was "of all writers ancient and modern—the one who kept off the greatest distance from common sense."

But who reads Johnson's writings today. 200 years after he was born? Who read the didactic cogitations of "Rasselas?" or the pompous platitudes of "Irene?" It was Goldsmith who truly said to him: "If you were to write a fable about little fishes, Doctor, you would make the little fishes talk like whales." Yet all this linguistic advoirdupois disappears in Boswell's book. Nobody reads the "Lives of the Poets" any longer. The world has thrown the great "Dixonary" aside as ruthlessly as Becky Sharp flung hers out of the carriage window; but everybody listens to Johnson as he talks and talks and talks through Bozzy's immortal pages.

THE CHIEF DELIGHT.

Bronson—Did your wife have a good time in the country?

Woodson—No; the only thing that reconciled her was the thought that she stayed away two weeks longer than the woman next door.

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