

there still seemed to brood over its Great Hall, where the afternoon's festivities were to take place, not a little of the fug of centuries. It was the hottest day of the summer, and though somebody had opened a tentative window or two, the atmosphere remained distinctive and individual. In this hall the youth of Market Snodsbury had been eating its daily lunch for a matter of five hundred years, and the flavour lingered. The air was sort of heavy and languorous, if you know what I mean, with the scent of Young England and boiled beef and carrots."

The 'scent of Young England' is, as doubtless you will appreciate, a delicate allusion to the fact that schoolboys and personal hygiene are not necessarily well acquainted.

Absolutely nothing in common, of course, with these splendid surroundings or this audience!

So why compound my difficulties by taking as the principal subject of this address a man, who observed:

"Lectures were once useful; but now, when all can read, and books are so numerous, lectures are unnecessary. If your attention fails, and you miss part of a lecture, it is lost; you cannot go back as you do upon a book"<sup>1</sup>.

The short answer is provided by one of the finest English appellate judges of the last 100 years, the late, much admired and much missed Tom Bingham, Lord Bingham of Cornhill, the first serving professional judge ever to be made a Knight of the Garter, the oldest and highest order of chivalry in England, and which it is in the personal gift of the Monarch to bestow. In his time, Tom Bingham held the appointments of Master of the Rolls, Lord Chief Justice of England and Senior Law Lord. A true scholar of Dr. Samuel Johnson's works, he considered that:

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<sup>1</sup> James Boswell: 'Life of Johnson', p. 1136. Hereafter all citations, unless expressly noted, are to the same work and the page references appear in the text.

“[Dr] Johnson said more sensible things about the law than any lawyer who ever lived”<sup>2</sup>.

An all the more impressive accolade, because the man upon whom it was bestowed was never licensed to practice law.

So who was Dr. Johnson, this man “*whose talents, acquirements, and virtues, were so extraordinary, that the more his character is considered, the more he will be regarded by the present age, and by posterity, with admiration and reverence?*” (p.1402). And why, nearly 230 years after his death in December 1784, are his observations and writings still so pertinent to the practice of law?

That Johnson is a towering figure in English literature is beyond argument. His maxims are world famous, among them, perhaps best known of all:

“[Y]ou find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No. Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford” (p.859).

His literary fame rests on three great works in particular, the first of which is his ‘Dictionary, with a Grammar and History, of the English Language’, published in 1755. The Dictionary was a truly remarkable feat of scholarship. Johnson produced it, with the aid of only six assistants, in the space of nine years. It took the 40 members of the Académie Française some 40 years to complete a similar exercise in the French language. Or as the great actor, David Garrick, put it – with due respect to my adoptive country of residence:

“..... and Johnson well arm’d like a hero of yore  
Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more!” (p. 215).

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Johnson and the Law and Other Essays on Johnson’: Tom Bingham, publ. Inner Temple London and Dr. Johnson’s House Trust, 2010 , p.7.

The second masterpiece is 'The Plays of William Shakespeare', published in eight volumes in 1765. Johnson's study of the works was remarkable for its even-handedness. As Boswell noted: unlike the panegyrists whose praise ... *"like that of counsel [was] upon his own side of the [case]: Johnson's was like the grave, well-considered, and impartial opinion of the judge, which falls from lips with weight and is received with reverence"* (p.351).

The third, his 'Lives of the English Poets', was published in 1781.

In fact, the foundations of Johnson's literary reputation had already been laid in May 1738 with the publication of: 'London, a Poem, in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal' and which, as Boswell, put it with perhaps just the slightest hint of hyperbole: *"burst forth with a splendour, the rays of which will for ever encircle his name"* (p.86). An interesting comment that, because the work was published anonymously! Alexander Pope, unarguably then the greatest living poet in England, was one of many intrigued to learn the identity of the writer. When told that 'London' was the work of *"some obscure man [whose] name was Johnson"*, Pope replied with some prescience: *"he will soon be déterré"* (pp.92& 412).

But in addition to being a philologist, lexicographer, translator, critic and poet of the first rank, he was a regular contributor to some of the leading journals of the day (indeed, until he was 52, he derived his earnings principally from his articles and translations). If that were not enough, he was a polemicist and pamphleteer. He reserved particular venom for the then rebellious colony of America and anything which might put in question the British Crown's right to the territory. They were, he contended: *"... a race of convicts and ought to be thankful for anything we*