


## James Boswell (1740-1795)

Year	Event	Commentary
1740	James is born in Edinburgh on October 29; his father is Alexander Boswell, who has been a member of the Edinburgh Faculty of Advocates since 1729; his mother is Euphemia Erskine, daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel John Erskine, Deputy Governor of Stirling Castle.	James was the oldest of three brothers, and was timid and delicate, with a tendency towards "melancholy" as a child (see Ochse, chs. 4 & 6, Simonton, ch. 3); his father was stern, and himself being a dedicated jurist, had similarly high expectations for his son; Boswell's mother was delicate and affectionate, holding "gently sentimental religious views".
1745	At the age of 5, James begins his education at James Mundell's private academy in the West Bow, Edinburgh; for some reason, James takes poorly to Mundell's academy, developing a severe psychosomatic illness.	High Street, Edinburgh by David Allan
1749	James's father, Alexander, becomes laird of Auchinleck in Ayrshire, and the family moves there; the family hires as tutor John Dun, who was a capable teacher, whose curriculum included a wide range of literature, and who helped the young James master Latin.	
1752	John Dun is appointed minister of Auchinleck (through the patronage of Alexander Boswell), and is replaced as the boys' tutor by one Joseph Fergusson, who appears to have been something of a failure as a minister; the young James Boswell finds him "completely uncongenial".	
1753–58	James enrolls in the arts course at Edinburgh University; one of his teachers – shared by William Robertson – is Professor of John Stevenson, whose influence on Boswell was "powerful and permanent"; Boswell endured several adolescent crises during his Edinburgh years (over religion, free will, his forbidden sexual desires) but seems to have emerged with some degree of confidence, happiness, and sense of achievement.	

- 1754 James' father, Alexander, is appointed to the prestigious Court of Sessions (Scotland's supreme court for both religious and civil matters), and received the judiciary title Lord Auchinleck.
- 1758 James returns to Edinburgh University to study law, but becomes enthralled with the theatre; his father decides to send him to study at Glasgow, where there are fewer distractions; the young Boswell attends lectures by Adam Smith.
- 1760 While in Glasgow James falls for a Roman Catholic actress, and decides to become a monk or priest; his father, when hearing of this, is appalled and asks to see his son immediately; James's response is to run off for London, the first step in his escape to the new religion; while in London, Boswell is immediately taken by London and all it has to offer, and is taken to bed by his first prostitute, Sally Forrester; with great luck, or great insight, Boswell's father sends the young Lord Eglinton to London to befriend Boswell; Eglinton, who knows London well, instructs Boswell fully in the delights of London, and soon Roman Catholicism is forgotten.
- 1760–62 Boswell studies law in Edinburgh under his father's supervision; Boswell is resentful of his confinement, and remembering his London experiences, tries to approximate them in Edinburgh when he can – he contracts his second case of gonorrhea, having affairs with several young women, both married and unmarried; during this time Boswell writes pamphlets and reviews, but his writing, although competent, shows no signs of his later genius.
- 1762–63 Boswell passes the bar exam, and is allowed to go to London to seek a commission in a Guards unit (his current occupational passion); this is his second visit to London; on May 16, 1763, Boswell meets Samuel Johnson – after an initially rough meeting, the two become fast friends (Johnson is 53, Boswell 22).
- 1763–65 Boswell gives up on his plan to join the Guards, capitulates to his father, and consents to become a lawyer; it is decided he should study law at Utrecht, and then take a modest continental tour; impressed by Johnson's piety, Boswell tries out chastity and hard work, but is disappointed to find that a life of dissipation brings him the most

Boswell as a young man



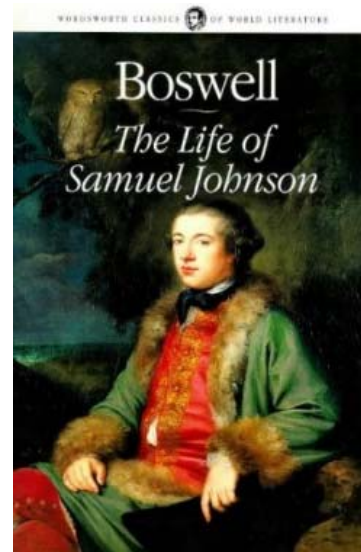
During the autumn of this year Boswell begins the journal that was to be the central expression of his genius; his zest for life was apparently not fully savored until life was all written down, and Boswell had a rare talent for imaginative verbal reconstruction; his journal is written in the present, with vivid descriptions of the characters' talk, actions, and gestures.

Boswell's continental tour includes Germany, Switzerland (where he visits Rousseau and Voltaire), and Italy; he makes a six-week tour of Corsica, and interviews the heroic Corsican chieftain, Pasquale de Paoli; Paoli becomes a lifelong friend, and Boswell writes his story in the London newspapers.

happiness.

- 1766–80 Boswell returns to Edinburgh, is admitted to the bar, and for 17 years practices law with complete regularity and a fair degree of assiduity; he is a capable courtroom lawyer, especially in criminal law, but this is not an avenue to fame and fortune; he still takes occasional trips to London, which he cherishes.
- 1768 Boswell publishes his *An Account of Corsica, The Journal of a Tour to that Island, and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli*; the book is hugely successful, and Boswell wins immediate fame.
- 1769 After numerous amorous associations, and "planned" or "intended" marriages, Boswell finally *does* marry, his first cousin, Margaret Montgomerie.

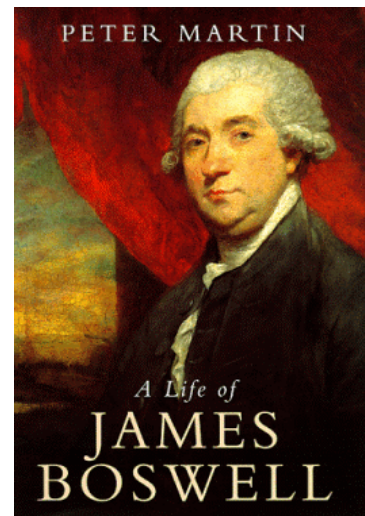
Boswell's *Life of Johnson*  
(young Boswell on the cover)



- 1773 Boswell is elected to The Club, the brilliant circle that Sir Joshua Reynolds had had formed around Dr. Johnson; in the following years Boswell achieves some tangible personal success, including five healthy and promising children, being made an examiner of the Faculty of Advocates, and master of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge of Masons (and offered the grand mastership of Scotland).
- 1777–83 Boswell publishes a series of 70 essays, significantly entitled *The Hypochondriack*.
- 1782 Boswell becomes laird of Auchinleck, managing the estate with attention and some shrewdness.
- 1784 Samuel Johnson dies, and Boswell decides to begin publishing the journals of his life with Johnson.
- 1785 Boswell moves to London, ostensibly to improve his law practice and to supervise his publications, but more likely to more fully experience the pleasures of London; his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson* is published; the book is a best-seller, but also controversial because of the way Boswell portrays himself.
- 1786 Boswell is called to the English bar from the Inner Temple, and moves his family to London; after this he has almost no legal practice, but concentrates on writing the *Life of Johnson*.

Despite his successes, by 1776 Boswell is showing signs of dissatisfaction with his life, both professional and personal: he made a failed entry into politics (his foe was Henry Dundas, who was also William Robertson's nemesis), began to drink heavily, and also began to traffic with the women of the town when away from his wife; his relationship with his wife deteriorated, and by 1778 it was obvious that she was critically ill with tuberculosis.

Peter Martin's *A Life of Boswell*



- 1789 His wife had moved to Auchinleck because of her illness; when she dies on June 4, 1789, Boswell is not at her side, but still in London.
- 1791 Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* was published; contemporary criticism set the pattern of acclaim for the work, but disdain for the author.
- 1793 Second edition of the *Life* is published.
- 1795 Boswell dies, unhappy in his professional life, but deeply loved by his five children and his few friends.
- For long it was believed that Boswell's personal papers were destroyed, but these were discovered in the 1920s and 1930s; these papers showed Boswell to be a journalist and diarist of the highest caliber; according to the Encyclopedia Britannica: "*The Life of Johnson* will always be regarded as Boswell's greatest achievement, although, since the publication of his papers, its unique values can be seen to be derivative. It is the stretches of Johnson's conversation that make it superior, and those conversations were lifted bodily from the journal, sometimes with so little change that the journal leaves served as printer's copy. The extended commercial publication of the journal, by proving his ability to compete with 20th-century authors on their own terms, has confirmed and added to Boswell's stature as an artist. It also for the first time gives the general reader a properly complex portrait."