Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) and Pembroke College

Samuel Johnson was 'the most illustrious of the sons of Pembroke', declared John Wilson Croker in his edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1831). A poet, translator, essayist, biographer, lexicographer, dramatist, and celebrated editor of Shakespeare, Johnson is 'arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history', the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* confirms. In the annals of Pembroke, he offers a more complex history in which he is both errant and exemplary. As the twentieth-century critic Donald Greene suggests, Johnson was, in some ways, Pembroke's 'angry young man'. 'I thought to fight my way by my literature and…wit' while disregarding 'all power and authority', as Johnson himself admits. Conversely, Pembroke was also the locus of his first published work. Johnson's Latin translation of Pope's *Messiah*, written 'as a College Exercise', was included in the *Miscellany of Poems by Several Hands* (1731) by John Husbands, a Fellow of the College. 'The Translation of Mr. *Pope*'s *Messiah* was deliver'd to his Tutor…by Mr. *Johnson*', Husbands noted in his 'Preface': ''tis hoped [it] will be no Discredit to the excellent Original'. Johnson's own opinion was somewhat different: 'I wrote it…to shew the tutors what I could do, rather than what I was willing should be done'.

Johnson joined Pembroke as an undergraduate (and commoner) in October 1728, taking up residence above the main gateway in what was, at that point, the upper floor – two small attic rooms that, in interesting ways, presaged the garret in Gough Square where, two decades later, he would compose his celebrated *Dictionary of the English Language*. Eighteenth-century Pembroke was a small and tightly-regulated academic institution. All students, irrespective of age and year, studied the same subjects with classes (and morning prayers) beginning at 6 a.m., two hours before breakfast. After breakfast at 8 a.m. came classes on Natural Philosophy (on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays), and Rhetoric on Tuesdays, followed (at 2 p.m.) by Greek (a subject continued on Friday afternoons and which, Johnson confirmed, he 'read solidly' during his time at College). Saturdays followed a similar pattern, enlivened by the public performance ('Declamatio') in the Hall of the Latin composition set for that week. 'Disputations' ('argumental contests', as Johnson explained in his *Dictionary* of 1755) were a further feature, devoted to philosophy on Saturdays (and theology on Thursdays). Both lasted from 4 p.m. until dinner. Two of Johnson's Latin compositions remain in the College archives, amply attesting to

his pithy fluency (as well as the 'zeal for Languages' he retained across his life). Even so, he clearly found such public performance a trial. Anxiety and competitiveness were both apparent. 'I could not bear [John] Meeke's superiority', Johnson later recalled of one of his fellow undergraduates: 'I tried to sit as far from him as I could, that I might not hear him construe'.

In principle, as Johnson reflected, 'there are excellent rules of discipline in every college'. In practice, this also meant there was little room for flexibility or the kind of intellectual independence that Johnson preferred – a feature in evidence from his first day in Pembroke when, at an initial gathering of students and fellows, he famously sat silent for a while before engaging fluently with the writings of Macrobius. By no means standard student fare, this swiftly established him, in the view of William Adams -- then a junior Fellow but later Master of Pembroke (1775-89) -- as 'the best qualified of any undergraduate to be admitted into the University'. Undergraduates, Johnson later stated, 'seldom read any books but what are put into their hands by their tutors'. His own reading (and writing), here and elsewhere, often followed a different course. Other independent reading Johnson completed at Pembroke included, for example, William Law's newly-published *Serious Call to a Holy Life* (1728). Johnson had found this in the College Library and, picking it up, had expected to find it a 'dull book, (as such books usually are)'. Instead, as he confessed, Law proved 'quite an overmatch for me', prompting 'the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion'. Across Johnson's writing – as, for instance, in his celebrated poem 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749) as well as in the essays of the *Rambler* (1750-52) – the legacies of Law's work are plain.

Johnson's spirit of independence could, however, also be problematic, a fact confirmed by the ample fines ('arbitrary inflictions', as Johnson termed them) that the College 'Battels Books' still record under his name. His first week in the College was marked by a decision not to attend the required instruction from his tutor, William Jorden. An inclination for 'sliding' on the frozen Christ Church meadows brought other absences later in the term. Even work that was completed could take unexpected directions. A Latin essay prompted by an extract from Horace turned into a spirited attack on the 'muddy drink' available in College, with the added reassurance that 'purer drink' would surely 'nourish' undergraduate achievement in more productive ways. Likewise, asked to produce a poem on the Gunpowder Plot, Johnson instead wrote one entitled 'Somnium' on the basis that his muse 'had come to him in his sleep, and

whispered that it did not become him to write on such subjects as politicks'. Advised that he should focus on 'humbler themes', Johnson, as he informed his tutor, had duly obeyed.

Johnson's time at Pembroke as an undergraduate was relatively brief – he left the College in December 1729 after thirteen months' continuous residence. From the beginning, his studies had been financed by a small legacy received by his mother, as well as a possible promise of help from a local squire in Staffordshire whose son had joined Pembroke in 1727. Nevertheless, as William Adams recalled in a letter to James Boswell (17 February 1785), by late 1729 Johnson's 'Remittances from the Country fell short' while 'his Debts in the College tho' not great were increasing'. Johnson's last few months in the College were clearly troubled. Financial difficulties played a part, exacerbated by the increasing toll of fines. Johnson's weekly expenditure across the final months of 1729 reveals, even so, little sign of deliberate economy or enforced constraint. If, as Boswell records, 'an eleemosynary supply of shoes' appeared outside his door (a gift intended perhaps to remedy the parlous state of Johnson's footwear), it met with 'spirited refusal'.

Johnson was, however, also struggling in other ways. He had gained an early reputation for being a 'lounger' ('lounging at the College gate, with a circle of young students around him, whom he was entertaining with his wit and keeping from their studies', as Bishop Percy confirmed) in ways that did not suggest habits of industry or rigorous self-application. By Michaelmas of 1729, such matters were coming to a head. A diary entry, written in October 1729, made plain his determination to cast off indolence, as well as to resist the dangerous charms of the 'syren Sloth' to which he had hitherto succumbed. Other notebook entries record Johnson's increasingly ambitious (and unrealistic) plans by which he might complete the schemes of reading required. On 20 November 1729, for example, he carefully tabulated the effects of reading ten pages a day, or fifty, or 300, or 600; sixty pages, he calculated, would yield 17,280 pages in a year, which would surely be enough.

Yet conspiring against such industry was a growing sense of melancholy. As Johnsen later noted, this was a 'morbid' affliction that began around his twentieth year, and featured at intervals throughout his life. A fondness for draughts, played at Pembroke with his friend, Phillip Jones, was, as Boswell noted in his *Life of Johnson*, a source of 'innocent soothing relief from the melancholy that distressed him so often'. 'There is', Boswell added, 'a composure and

gravity in draughts which insensibly tranquilizes the mind'. Friendship – with Jones, Adams, and others -- was also part of the pleasures of college life. But, as 1729 drew to a close, work, money, and melancholy presented insurmountable challenges. Johnson took the difficult decision to return to Lichfield, leaving behind a large box of books as witness to his intention to return, and resume his studies.

Johnson's books remained in College until 1734, when they were at last reclaimed. A lack of money, coupled with his father's death, meant that his own anticipated return to undergraduate life did not take place. Only six of Johnson's cohort of 1728 (out of twelve students who matriculated) would, in fact, complete their full course of study – a pattern that is easily replicated across other colleges and, indeed, the university at a whole. University attendance was far more flexible at this point; in the early eighteenth century, an incomplete degree by no means brought the sense of failure that often accompanies later narratives of university life. Instead, for many, it was the fact of being at Oxford – and the experience it offered – that was ultimately more important. Johnson's friend John Meeke might therefore remain at Pembroke, pursuing the 'Scholar's Life' as evoked in Johnson's 'Vanity of Human Wishes' -- complete with its telling mention of the 'tempting Novelty' that must be resisted and where, at least ideally, 'Sloth' must 'effuse her opiate fumes in vain'. Johnson's own career moved in different directions. 'SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPREST', he declared in 1738 ('London: A Poem', l.177). If, as Johnson informed his friend Thomas Warton in 1754, 'Meeke was left behind at Oxford to feed on a Fellowship', he instead 'went to London to get my living'. 'Now, Sir', he announced, 'see the difference of our literary characters!'. An initially unsuccessful career as a schoolmaster was gradually displaced by that of a versatile and highly talented professional writer whose works spanned a diverse range of genres from journalism to poetry, drama to biography, ethics to politics, to writing on gender, and slavery, or the state (and fate) of the Falklands Islands.

Johnson's links with the College would, however, continue, fostered, in particular, by his close friendship with William Adams. In the late 1740s, we can find Adams in London attending the opening performance of Johnson's play *Irene*, as well as discussing dictionary-making in a visit to Gough Square where Johnson was busily at work on the *Dictionary*. Adams's visit is, for

example, the source of Johnson's celebrated exchange on the relative merits of the French Academy:

ADAMS. "But the French Academy, which consists of forty members, took forty years to compile their Dictionary".

JOHNSON. "Sir, thus it is. This is the proportion. Let me see; forty times forty is sixteen hundred. As three to sixteen hundred, so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman."

Johnson made, in turn, his own visits to Oxford, relishing the chance in 1754 to talk to the College staff he had known over two decades earlier, even if an encounter with the then Master, John Ratcliffe, was less successful. 'There lives a man, who lives by the renown of literature, and will not move a finger to support it', Johnson trenchantly declared. Later visits in e.g. 1776, 1781, and June 1782, the latter accompanied by the novelist and writer Hannah More, were far more successful. More vividly evoked her tour of Pembroke, following dinner with Adams, now Master and living in the Lodgings. 'Do we not gallant it about!', she wrote: 'You cannot imagine with what delight [Johnson] showed me every part of his own College…he ran over with pleasure the history of the juvenile days he spent there'.

Adams's daughter, Sarah, is an equally valuable witness. 'I cannot help repeating to myself at the end of every sentence, 'O that these things were written in a book', she stated in 1784, describing Johnson's conversation over dinner: 'I shall always in future wish there was a Person employed behind a Skreen to write down every word he utters'. Boswell provides his own detailed record of the company and the lively conversation, commending the pleasure in 'leading a College life, without restraint, and with superiour elegance, in consequence of our living in the Master's house' (*Life*, 13 June 1784). Johnson's last visit to Oxford, accompanied by Francis Barber, his devoted Jamaican servant, was in November 1784, a few weeks before he died. Too ill to go himself, he sent Francis to see the aerial ascent of the 'first English aeronaut', Thomas Sadler, in a hydrogen air balloon from the nearby Botanical Gardens. Johnson's intellectual curiosity, and love for Oxford, were alike evident until the end.