

Redefine literary pleasure with this splendid first edition of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*

Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*. London: J.& P. Knapton, T. & T. Longman, C. Hitch & etc., 1755. 17 inches x 11 inches (432 x 280 mm), 3 volumes: 2,200 pages.

Johnson's *Dictionary*, like the works of Shakespeare, is one of those rare monuments of literature that embodies its language and culture while retaining the distinctiveness and immediacy of its creator's personality. No dictionary so vast is so thoroughly marked with the stamp of its compiler: what required an academy in other nations was achieved in eighteenth-century England by a single self-styled "harmless drudge" in only nine years.

The need for a dictionary that would evaluate, rather than merely record usage, was acutely felt in the early eighteenth century. It was generally agreed that the English language at the turn of that century had achieved an unsurpassed exactitude and elegance, but had since become corrupted.

This situation was remedied by Samuel Johnson. An irascible yet deeply sensitive polymath, Johnson devoured the literature of his own and preceding eras with an unmatched vigor. In command of an intellect and memory of phenomenal acuity, he performed the work of dozens with grace and with an idiosyncratic consistency and depth little short of miraculous.

What Johnson did, simply, was to compile the best dictionary: the most authoritative, the most consistent, the most transparent in technique and intent. He did this by the clarity of his definitions and, above all, by the careful selection and systematic use of examples. The incisive definitions, supported by extracts from the best works of preceding centuries, give Johnson's *Dictionary* enduring appeal; it is a unique source of inspiration and insight into the English language, as well as being one the most entertaining works of its kind ever assembled.

Johnson's objectives — to capture the entire vocabulary of received English, and to preserve it at its peak — may have been unreachable, but his methods

were good. Johnson's definitions, together with the examples, gave both Britons and foreigners the tools for correct speech. Johnson had amassed these examples in his extensive reading and thus was able to assemble the work in record time. He was the right man for the job; and in him English lexicography had the first of several mammoth strokes of luck.

This is a copy that belonged to Richard Warren, personal physician to both Johnson and his biographer Boswell, and is now housed in the Warnock Library. It is bound in three volumes in contemporary full tan calf; gilt border on covers, top edges, and fore-edges, gilt-decorated spine with raised bands, compartments decorated with gilt sprigs, on olive morocco in fifth compartment and red morocco in sixth, red morocco lettering piece on second compartment: 'johnson's | dictionary | vol. i. [ii.] [iii.]', third compartment with 'a-e [f-p] [q-z]' on olive morocco.

Octavo code: johjoh, johjoi, johjok