

MINUTES OF MEMBERS' MEETING HELD AT WESLEY'S CHAPEL, CITY ROAD, ON  
SATURDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2009.

Chairman: Mr Michael Bundock.

Speaker: Professor Peter Martin.

Apologies for absence were received from, Dr Ilse Vickers, Dr Freya Johnston, and Sue Purcell.

Notices:

1. The Speaker in April will be Dr Ken Smith, on:  
"THE PRESENT HOUR ALONE IS MAN'S': JOHNSON'S  
POETRY AND THE REDEMPTION OF TIME."
2. Information leaflets of interest to Members are displayed on the side as usual including details of, and applications for the Boswell Luncheon on May 16<sup>th</sup>.
4. Tea and biscuits are available after the meeting at the modest price of 50p a cup.
5. Minutes of the meeting held on Saturday, February 9<sup>th</sup> 2009 were read and signed by the Chairman, after approval.
6. Introduction of the speaker: Peter Martin is Professor Emeritus of English Literature. Since his *"Life of James Boswell,"* published by Wiedenfeld and Nicholson in 1999 and Yale University Press in 2000, he has published, *"The Essential Boswell: Selected Writings"* (Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 2003) and, more recently, *"Samuel Johnson: A Biography,"* (Wiedenfeld and Nicholson and Harvard University Press, 2008). Harvard University Press are publishing his edition of *"Samuel Johnson: Selected Essays,"* in August this year. He lives for half the year in West Sussex and half in Spain.

Professor Martin began by drawing our attention to a rail in Levett's Field, Lichfield which Johnson, with other boys from the Grammar School jumped over for exercise and which, towards the end of his life, he jumped over again. He said that this rail may be taken as one symbol of Johnson's moral ethos, his need to overcome, to win, to escape monotony - and by extension to keep moving, to travel.

Disillusionment and bitterness over his failures and essentially unhappy childhood and early adulthood, together with a constitutional restlessness and need to be moving forward, lay behind Johnson's walk to London with Garrick in 1737, which we may regard as an archetypal, symbolic journey to the metropolis: the young man coming to the city to make good. When he arrived there, however, he met with further disappointment and frustration which, in spite of a few successes, like *"London: A Poem"* (1738), continued for twelve years

until he began writing the "*Rambler*" essays in 1749 and beyond that up to the publication of the "*Dictionary*" in 1755.

Those difficult years of near poverty produced, among other things, moral writings featuring protagonists like himself who travel to a metropolis to find the Promised Land and are embittered and profoundly disillusioned by what they find there and what happens to them there. A number of these moral tales also anticipate his own feelings and experiences when he returned to Lichfield for the first time in twenty-two years in the winter of 1761-62. Until then, he scarcely travelled out of London - his first trip to Oxford, for example, was not until 1754. Also Johnson's poverty and consequent inability to travel and enact in his own life the romance and adventure of wide travel, conspired to make him a harsh critic of travel books that were constantly being published and sharpen his own ideas of what travel should be like, not social intercourse, but discovery of the way people lived and the conditions in which they live; demography; economic and human stresses. He found the journey to France with the Thrales too much like the Grand Tour.

Then, in his mid-fifties, after the receipt of his pension in 1762 which enabled him for the first time to travel, he met Boswell and the Thrales, who took him to the Hebrides, Wales and Paris, trips on which he could demonstrate his principles of enlightened cultural travel. His "*Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*" as well as his letters to Mrs Thrale while on that journey, are filled with pronouncements of what travel should be all about, and what books on travel should be like. The trips to Wales and France, however are largely negative examples in that the relative lack of opportunities for him to experience his principles resulted in his disinterest, a lack of excitement. During these years he also dreamed of where he would like to go on trips to the far corners of the globe. He travelled frequently in England too, which qualified in his mind as travel - to Lichfield, Oxford, Birmingham, Devon, Brighton, Essex, West Sussex, Wiltshire and other places.

In the 1770s, he began to visit Lichfield frequently and did so until his death, driven there by a desire to complete the curve of travel in his life, actual and symbolic, and found there both disappointment and fulfilment: on the negative side his responses realizing his protagonists' experiences in his moral tales in the 1750s; on the positive side, finding a kind of safety and reassurance in bittersweet memories of his youth, for example his leaping over the Levett's Field rail three years before his death and the Latin poem he wrote on the pond in Lichfield, a few months before his death, where his father taught him to swim, which include the lines:

*"Hard axes have destroyed those ancient shades:  
The pool lies naked, even to distant eyes.*

*But the water, never tiring still runs on  
In the same channel:"*

The "*hard axes*" concluded Professor Martin, are destructive, but life, like the river, glides on regardless of the disappointments, and we can still snatch at the compensations of certain healing memories.

After a short discussion, Professor Martin was warmly thanked by Mrs Bennett for his interesting insight into the dark recesses of Johnson's mind in such an entertaining and interesting paper.