“In the Midst of the Jovial Crowd”

Young James Boswell in London, 1762–1763
“In the Midst of the Jovial Crowd”

Young James Boswell in London, 1762–1763

An exhibition at The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University
April through mid-October 2013
Curated by James J. Caudle, The Associate Editor,
Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell
“I am indulging the most agreeable reveries imaginable, I am thinking of... composing some elegant Work which shall be much read, and much admired. I am thinking of the brilliant Scenes of happiness that I shall enjoy in the Guards, How I shall be acquainted with the Grandeur and Politeness of a Court, be entertained with all the elegance of dress and Diversions, become a favourite of Ministers of State, and the adoration of Ladies of Quality, Beauty & Fortune. How many parties of Pleasure shall I have in Town! How many fine jaunts to the noble Seats of Dukes, Lords and members of Parliament. I am thinking of the perfect knowledge that I shall acquire of men and manners, of the many ingenious and learned Men whose Intimacy I shall be honoured with, Of the many literary amusing Anecdotes which I shall pick up, and of the magnificent Letters which I shall write to You.”

James Boswell to Andrew Erskine, 8–9 May 1762
James Boswell (1740–1795), Scottish laird, lawyer, and author, was best known from the 1790s until the 1920s as the biographer and transcriber of the conversations of the great man of letters Samuel Johnson (1709–1784). Boswell’s greatest published work was the Life of Samuel Johnson (1791), which is still considered a landmark in the development of modern biography. However, in the wake of the recovery and publication of his private papers from the 1920s onward, Boswell is now studied in his own right as a master of autobiography and biography; and he is read with pleasure by non-academics as a clever and amusing teller of tales of life in Britain in the late eighteenth century.

Boswell was born in Edinburgh into a very old baronial Scottish family from the county of Ayrshire. For two generations they had been advocates (lawyers) in Edinburgh, and his father, Lord Auchinleck, was a judge on the benches of the two highest courts in Scotland. Early on, young “Jamie” Boswell felt confined and trapped by his provincial background. Rejecting the future dictated by family tradition—to be a country estate’s resident laird in Auchinleck and a lawyer in Edinburgh—he instead traveled south to seek fortune and celebrity in London. Boswell wrote of himself in May 1761 as “[a] young fellow whose happiness was allways centered in London.” He recalled this lifetime’s obsession to one of his sons in October 1794: “LONDON has for these thirty years and upwards been the object of my wish as my scene of exertion.” In March 1760, without telling any of his friends or family, he had fled to London, where he tried to live until his father traveled south and took him back home three months later. His better-known journey between 19 November 1762 and 5 August 1763, chronicled in his “London Journal” and celebrated in this exhibition, was actually his second—and better-planned—expedition to the city.
There would have been no need to explain to someone living in Edinburgh in 1762 why a young man with ambitions for national eminence and a glorious career would wish to migrate to London. The largest city in Britain, London was building new neighborhoods and pushing its way toward a million inhabitants; it was one of the handful of largest cities on the planet, and the largest outside East Asia. The political capital of Great Britain (Scotland having lost her secular parliament and royal court in the Union of 1707), London was the home of the Parliament as well as the royal court. The offices of the slowly growing state, with their Crown patronage jobs and places, were located there. Advancement in the professions of law, medicine, and the military was best gotten in London. Since it was the center of the British economy, anyone wishing to succeed in business, like Boswell’s brother David or his publisher Alexander Donaldson, would find it prudent to move there. As Johnson roughly joked, “Sir, I believe the noblest Prospect that a Scotsman ever sees, is the road which leads him to England” (Journ. 6 July 1763).

Beyond the utilitarian reasons to live in London, its attractions as a capital of pleasure and fashion were surely to be considered. During “The Season,” provincial aristocracy and gentry flocked there. The national theaters of Covent Garden and Drury Lane as well as the Royal Opera House offered new works like David Mallet’s *Elvira* and Thomas Arne’s *Artaxerxes* alongside the classics. The great pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh and promenades such as the Mall offered places to see and be seen, meet and be met. The great urban houses like Northumberland House offered salons and evening “routs.” For those of more modest income, there were middle-class diversions: poring over books such as *Epistle to Hogarth* and Hume’s *History and Fingal* at a bookseller’s, looking at the new political prints against Lord Bute and
the Scots immigrants at a printseller’s, eating a filling meal at a chop-
house, enjoying coffee and conversation at a coffee-house, and drinking
moderately (or, as often, heavily) at a tavern or punch-house. For those
who were not squeamish, there were cockfights, the judicial drama of
trials at the Old Bailey, and public executions at Tyburn.

Even as London offered career opportunities and amusements in
the same place, emerging information technologies were making the
city accessible, rendering it legible. Books like Rivington’s Complete
Guide and Harris’s List as well as maps like the London Directory took
the chaos of the sprawling city and made it intelligible to newcomers
and even natives. The city was created and sustained by print culture.
Before Boswell even got to London, he knew it from the many accounts
in fiction and nonfiction, novels and plays.

Although the metropolis for most Londoners was a place of unend-
ing drudgery and the struggle to make a living, for a young gentleman of
Boswell’s social rank, it was a place of dreams. It certainly fired Boswell’s
ambition and imagination. “Surely I am a man of Genius. I deserve to
be taken notice of. O that my Grandchildren might read this character
of me.—James Boswell a most amiable Man. He improved and beauti-
ﬁed his paternal estate of Auchinleck: made a distinguished ﬁgure in
parliament; had the honour to command a Regiment of footguards, and
was one of the brightest Wits in the court of George the Third.” (Journ.
7 Feb. 1763).

There were several career paths Boswell might have taken in set-
ting himself up in London. The Earl of Eglinton advocated Boswell’s
seeking a commission in the Army. This path was the scheme that
Boswell most systematically followed in 1762–63, and he eventually
sought and found help from Eglinton, the Duke of Queensberry, and
the Countess of Northumberland in pursuing his Guards commission.

Mathias Finucane (active 1797), The Chop House. Etching and stipple with
engraving, published 1 August 1797 by Laurie & Whittle. 797.08.01.03
As Boswell’s pudgy and double-chinned silhouette revealed, he enjoyed
a good meal. The Georgian chop house, like the twentieth-century
American diner, provided plentiful plain food at cheap prices. The bill
of fare in this print offers a meat-heavy menu. On the table are cruets for
oils, vinegars, and sauces, as well as a decanter with a bottle ticket reading
“port.” Boswell recorded his impressions: “I went by myself & dined in a
Chophouse… My spirits grew better there. Realy good sustenance dispells
the vapours…. I grudge even a shilling for dinner” (Journ. 16 Mar 1763).
Thomas Sheridan encouraged him to enter the English legal profession and helped him to be registered at the Inner Temple. His father, Lord Auchinleck, wished for him to stay at home or go to Holland and train in the ancestral profession of the Scottish Law.

But Boswell was not solely concerned with business. Once arrived, he wanted to experience the social life of the megalopolis. He went to the brightly lit outdoor pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh, and to the great theaters at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Religious practice was another part of his plan. Rather than tying himself to one parish church, he set himself a program of visiting a new chapel or Church of England service every Sunday, although notably, these were all genteel churches of fashion. He frequented several booksellers’ shops and newspaper offices, both to buy books, magazines, and newspapers, and to ask some of them to publish his works. And of course, much of London life depended on drinking and dining: chop houses for the food, coffee houses for the conversation, punch houses for the fashionable cocktails, taverns for long conversations with friends over drinks. Although he initially planned to abstain from prostitutes, by the end of his stay he fell into old bad habits from an inability to resist London’s plethora of streetwalkers.

One of the most common sentiments expressed by Boswell about London is its muchness, its seemingly inexhaustible plenitude, its copiousness. He thought of London in April 1775 as “a high entertainment of itself. I see a vast museum of all objects, and I think with a kind of wonder that I see it for nothing”; and in March 1773 he invoked “the agreeable prospect of being in London, which includes so many interesting and favourite objects.”

The city presented a variety of faces to everyone who visited. Boswell explained to the readers of his Rampager essays in November 1771 the

---

Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) after Samuel Collings (d. 1793), *Imitations at Drury-Lane Theatre*. Etching, published 20 June 1786 by E. Jackson. 786.06.20.01+

Eighteenth-century theater audiences were often raucous and rowdy. Though outbursts by audience members were not inevitable, they ranged from juvenile noisemaking, to pelting the performers with oranges, to hissing the play or an actor, to demanding that the manager apologize, or even to tearing up the theater in a riot.

In this scene, Boswell amuses and appalls his mentor Hugh Blair, the Scottish clergyman and professor of rhetoric, by imitating a cow. Having been cheered by the London crowd for his mooing, Boswell discovers to his disappointment that his other barnyard impressions are not as highly appreciated. Boswell recorded this embarrassing story in the published Hebrides journal (1785) as a memory, but it was one of the many events he neglected to mention or suppressed in the 1762–63 London Journal.
13 allure of London, “that great emporium of men and manners, news and nonsense, politics and playhouses, and all other subjects of entertainment.” In the Life of Johnson, he wrote:

_I have often amused myself with thinking how different a place London is to different people. They, whose narrow minds are contracted to the consideration of some one particular pursuit, view it only through that medium. A politician thinks of it merely as the seat of government in its different departments; a grazier, as a vast market for cattle; a mercantile man, as a place where a prodigious deal of business is done upon ’Change; a dramatick enthusiast, as the grand scene of theatrical entertainments; a man of pleasure, as an assemblage of taverns, and the great emporium for ladies of easy virtue. But the intellectual man is struck with it, as comprehending the whole of human life in all its variety, the contemplation of which is inexhaustible._

When Boswell was tired of London, he was tired of life. Yet in the early 1760s, he was quite far from exhausting its contemplation. As he noted in January 1763 (writing of his 1760 voyage), this was “the time when I was first in London, when all was new to me, when I felt the warm glow of youthfull feeling, and was full of curiosity and wonder.”

William Dickinson (1746/7–1823) after Henry William Bunbury (1750–1811), _Patriots / St. Eustatia_. Etching with stipple in reddish-brown ink, published 15 October 1781 by W. Dickinson. 781.10.15.06+

This print portrays the type of experience Boswell described at Child’s Coffee House: “It is quite a place to my mind; dusky comfortable & warm with a Society of Citizens & Physicians who talk politics very fully & are very sagacious & sometimes jocular…” (Journ. 11 Dec. 1762). Coffee houses usually provided newspapers for their customers, and the central group in this print gathers anxiously around the late-breaking news in a Gazette Extraordinary. “St. Eustatia” refers to the Dutch colony of Saint Eustatius, which was captured by the British Army and Navy on 3 February 1781, but lost again by November.
Suggestions for further reading


Exhibition checklist in order of installation

Unless otherwise noted, all items are in the collection of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Checklist items printed in color are illustrated.

**INTRODUCTION**

**LONDON SOCIAL LIFE**

Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) after Samuel Collings (d. 1793)

*The Journalist: with a View of Auckinleck or the Land of Stones*

Etching and engraving with stipple

Published 15 May 1786 by E. Jackson

786.05.15.04+

Robert Pollard (1735–1838) and Francis Jukes (1745–1812) after Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827)

*Vauxhall*

Aquatint and etching with hand coloring

Published 28 June 1785 by J.R. Smith

785.06.28.01

Smith after Samuel Collings (d. 1793)

*A Peep Behind the Curtain at Drury Lane*

Etching and engraving with hand coloring

Published 1 July 1784 by Harrison & Co.

784.07.01.01

James Sayers (1748–1823)

*Known Characters in a Chop House*

Etching with hand coloring

Published ca. 1800

800.00.00.150+ Impression 1

William Dickinson (1746/7–1823) after Henry William Bunbury (1750–1811)

*Patriots / St. Eustatia*

Etching with stipple in reddish-brown ink

Published 15 October 1781 by W. Dickinson

781.10.15.06+

Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) after Samuel Collings (d. 1793)

*Imitations at Drury-Lane Theatre*

Etching

Published 28 June 1785 by J.R. Smith

785.06.28.01

Smith after Samuel Collings (d. 1793)

*A Citizen at Vauxhall*

Etching and engraving with hand coloring

Published 14 January 1789 by Thos. Cornell

789.01.14.01

Henry William Bunbury (1750–1811)

*Known Characters in a Chop House*

Etching with hand coloring

Published ca. 1800

800.00.00.150+ Impression 1
Mathias Finucane (active 1797)
The Chop House
Etching and stipple with engraving
Published 1 August 1797 by Laurie & Whittle
797.08.01.03

Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827)
A Brace of Blackguards
Aquatint and etching with hand coloring
Published 20 June 1789 by Mrs. Lay
789.06.20.01

Artist Unknown
An Evenings Invitation; with a Wink from the Bagnio
Mezzotint with hand coloring
Printed January 1773 for Carington Bowles
773.01.00.02+

William Hogarth (1697–1764)
“Royal Sport” Pit Ticket
Engraving
Published 5 November 1759
759.11.05.01++

CURRENT EVENTS

Artist Unknown
Décoration du Feu d’artifice Tire à Londres en Rejouissance de la Paix en 1763
Etching with hand coloring
Published 1763 by Mondhare
763.00.00.127+

William Hogarth (1697–1764)
The Bruiser C. Churchill…, state 4
Etching with engraving
Published 1 August 1763
Kinnaird 77k(b)

Artist Unknown
The Bruiser Triumphant: a Farce
Etching with engraving
Nineteenth-century restrike, first published 1763
763.08.00.01.1

George Townshend (1724–1807)
Sawney Discover’d, or, The Scotch Intruders
From A Political and Satirical History of the Years 1756–1762, no. 103
Etching
Published after 1760
761.00.00.03.1

George Townshend (1724–1807)
We are all a Comeing, or, Scotch Coal for ever
Etching
Published 1761
761.00.00.05+ Impression 1
**Artist Unknown**

*Scotch Paradise: a View of the Bute[eye]*
*full Garden of Edenburg*

Etching
Published February 1763 by E. Sumpter
763.02.00.01+

**Artist Unknown**

*A Prophecy. The Coach Overturn’d, or, the Fall of Mortimer*

Etching and engraving
Published 1762
762.00.00.29

**PEOPLE**

John Kay (1742–1826)

Major Andrew Fraser, the Honorable
Andrew Erskine, and Sir John Whitefoord

Etching, drypoint, and aquatint
Published 1785
785.00.00.94

**Artist Unknown, after a miniature by James Tassie (1735–1799)**

*George Dempster, Esq.*

Plate from *European Magazine,* September 1793

Engraving
Published 1 August 1793 by J. Sewell
Portraits D389 no. 1

Edmund Scott (ca. 1746–1810) after Robert Stewart (active 1776–1786)

*Thomas Sheridan*

Stipple engraving
Published 4 July 1789 for Charles Dilly
Portraits Sh552 no. 1

James Heath (1757–1834) after Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792)

*Samuel Johnson from the Original Picture in the Possession of James Boswell*

Engraving
Published 19 October 1761 for John Smith
Portraits P68 no. 1

**Artist Unknown, after Allan Ramsay (1713–1784)**

*George III, King of Great Britain*

Engraving on chine collé
Published 1771
Portraits G347 no. 2

**SOCIETY**

*Harris’s List of Covent-Garden Ladies*
London: H. Ranger, 1764
646 764 H24

*The London Directory, or, A new & Improved Plan of London, Westminster & Southwark*
London: Robert Sayer, 1774
Hand-colored map
File 15 782s+++*

*A Complete Guide to All Persons who Have any Trade or Concern with the City of London, and Parts Adjacent, 9th ed. with large additions and alterations*
London: J. Rivington [etc.], 1763
646 763 C73

Anonymous (James Boswell [1740–1795])

*The Cub, at New-market: a Tale*
London: Printed for R. and J. Dodsley, 1762
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
1971 304

James Boswell (1740–1795), Andrew Erskine (1740–1793), and George Dempster (1732–1818)

*Critical Strictures on the New Tragedy of Elvira, Written by Mr. David M’locch*
London: Printed for W. Flexney, near Gray’s-Inn, Holborn, 1763
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Tinker 311

James Boswell (1740–1795)

"Journal from the time of my leaving Scotland 15 Novr. 1762" (J 2.1)
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Boswell Collection, gen mss 89, Box 19

James Boswell (1740–1795)

"London Memoranda" (J 3)
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Boswell Collection, gen mss 89, Box 37, Folders 932–33
James Boswell (1740–1795)

“Scheme of living written at the White Lyon Inn Waterhouse, Fleetstreet the morning after my arrival in London,” 1762 (M 239)

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Boswell Collection, gen mss 89, Box 58, Folder 1233

**EVENTS AND PEOPLE**

James Boswell (1740–1795)

“Letter XLII, London, Nov. 20, 1762”

*Letters between the Honourable Andrew Erskine, and James Boswell, Esq.*

London: Printed by Samuel Chandler; for W. Flexney, near Gray’s-Inn-Gate, Holborn, 1763

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Tinker 312

*The Barber. A New Song*

Slip Song

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Boswell Collection, gen mss 89, Oversize, Box 71, Folder 1462

*The Thane of Bute. A New Song, 1762*

Slip Song

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Boswell Collection, gen mss 89, Box 65, Folder 1352

*The Grumblers of Great Britain: a New Humorous Political Song. By a Grumbletonian*  
Engraving with hand coloring  
Published 15 September 1762 by W. Tringham

762.09.15.01.1

*A New Humorous Medley: As It Was Performed on the Evening after the Proclamation of Peace,…*  
Broadside

London: J. Williams, 1763

763.03.22.01.1+

[A] List of the General and Field-Officers  
London: J. Millan, 1763

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

144 A2 Ar3 763

David Hume (1711–1776)

*The History of England*

London: A. Millar, 1759–1762

53 H882 754b

*The History of Jack and the Giants*  
Nottingham: Printed for the running stationers, [1800?]

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

1b94 t2 3.3
Aftermath

Items in this section are lent by James J. Caudle unless otherwise stated.

Frederick A. Pottle, editor (1897–1987)
*Boswell’s London Journal 1762–1763* Second edition with Foreword by Peter Ackroyd
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004

Gordon Turnbull, editor

James L. Clifford (1901–1978)
“Young Mr. Boswell Goes to London”
The *New York Times Book Review* November 5, 1950

Eric Reynolds (b. 1971), editor, *The Complete Crumb: The Early ’80s & Weirdo Magazine*
Second edition

R. Crumb (Robert Crumb [b. 1943])

Leonard Bacon, “A Candle on a Naughty World”
The *Saturday Review of Literature* 4 November 1950

Harold Tucker Webster (1885–1952)
“After Reading Boswell’s London Journal (1762–1763) Mr. Milquetoast burns the diary he kept in his youth,” (“The Timid Soul”)
The *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 April 1951

Courtesy of Yale Boswell Editions Press Files

Paul Darrow (b. 1921)
“Are You Sure it’s all Boswell”
Photographic reproduction of cartoon
The *New York Times Book Review* 22 May 1955

*Boswell’s London Journal. A Reading by Anthony Quayle* 
Album cover
New York: Caedmon Records, 1960