

Book Review

John Bugg (ed.) *The Joseph Johnson Letterbook*

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At the start of his introduction to this first-ever edition of Joseph Johnson's *Letterbook*, John Bugg describes Johnson's bookshop as a hub for some of the most important writers and artists of the time, 'like City Lights in Beat-era San Francisco, or Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company in 1920s Paris'. As an American academic at Fordham University, Bugg has successfully made a transatlantic leap to set Johnson in the context of the European enlightenment and the English book trade.

For anyone interested in the history of print culture in the late eighteenth century, the chance rediscovery of one of Joseph Johnson's business letterbooks has been akin to finding the holy grail. Johnson was in business as a bookseller-cum-publisher for almost fifty years. His *Letterbook* includes copy letters and memos written in the fifteen-year period leading up to 1809, the year of Johnson's death. He was the publisher of Joseph Priestley and of Thomas Paine, of Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth, and of course of John Newton and William Cowper. Leslie Chard considered Johnson 'the most important publisher in England from 1770 until 1810'.¹ His imprints included religion, science and medicine, languages, literature, politics, education, fiction and poetry. He was a shrewd businessman but one who also nurtured his authors. He was known by contemporaries for the weekly dinners that he gave at 72 St Paul's Churchyard, where he lived above the shop. Some of the greatest minds of the age met around his table to eat boiled cod, veal and vegetables.

It was thought that all the records of Johnson's business had disappeared, apart from a few letters found in his authors' archives. And then, from nowhere, this one small *Letterbook* surfaced in 1994 at Pickering & Chatto in London. It was then bought by the New York Public Library. An export licence was granted subject to photocopies of the *Letterbook's* pages being made available at the British Library. Until

the appearance of this edition by John Bugg, British scholars have had to make sense of the *Letterbook* via a mass of un-numbered and unwieldy photocopies. But his excellent edition now makes this key source for English literary history easily available.

The 217 copy letters and memos transcribed in this edition were mainly written by Johnson, or on his behalf, between the years 1795 and 1809 to some 130 correspondents. Most of the contents of the new edition come from the *Letterbook* itself, but Bugg has also usefully included a few of Johnson's earlier letters found in other archives and so far unpublished. These include five letters addressed to William Cowper.

The *Letterbook* brings to life the relations between a late eighteenth-century bookseller and his authors and printers. The letters also bear witness to the challenging conditions in which booksellers like Johnson had to do business. There was a constant threat of piracy from Scotland and beyond. Books had to be parcelled up and sent by carriage to the country or by ship, sometimes on long voyages to America and even India. Booksellers like Johnson were just beginning to invest in the burgeoning export business to the colonies, but payment could take years to arrive. Liberal-minded booksellers like Johnson ran the gauntlet of government suspicion as revolutionary ideas flooded in from abroad; one of the most moving letters in this collection was written by Johnson from the Kings Bench Prison where he was incarcerated in 1799 on the charge of seditious libel. And the frequency of Johnson's letters chasing non-payment of old debts, even from prison, helps explain why so many bookselling businesses foundered.

Towards the end of Johnson's lifetime he was recognised as 'the Father of the Trade'. But the business disappeared within a few decades of his death. Unlike some other prominent booksellers of the time such as the well-documented family businesses of John Murray and the Longmans, Joseph Johnson had no direct heirs. Gerald P. Tyson devoted a monograph to him, *Joseph Johnson, A Liberal Publisher* (University of Iowa Press, 1979), but its value was restricted by the lack of archival sources. Now, thanks to this edition of the rediscovered letterbook, we can document Johnson's business practice. John Bugg has provided an up-to-date biographical introduction and an assessment of Johnson's importance in the book trade. Additional sections in the introduction

discuss Johnson and science, Johnson's encouragement of women writers, in particular Mary Wollstonecraft whom he knew well, his role in the transatlantic book trade, and his trial and imprisonment.

As Bugg recognises, Joseph Johnson stands apart from most of his contemporaries for one particular reason. Unlike some more fashionable booksellers he was a dissenter. Johnson came from a Baptist family near Liverpool, and retained his social and professional connections with the nonconformists. He was apprenticed to a minor London bookseller who had ties to the dissenting community in Liverpool, and it was probably through these connections that he came into contact with Newton and later with William Cowper. On 13 March 1764 Newton was in London and wrote to his wife Polly, then in Liverpool, telling her to direct his correspondence care of Johnson.² This was the year that Joseph Johnson published Newton's anonymous *Authentic Narrative of Some Remarkable and Interesting Particulars in the Life of******, documenting Newton's early career as a slave trader and his religious conversion.

The *Letterbook* includes no letters to Newton himself. Presumably, once Newton moved from Olney to St Mary Woolnoth in London, a brisk walk away from St Paul's Churchyard, there was no need to write. But there are letters in the *Letterbook* about the printing and reprinting of Newton's works, both to the Warrington printer William Eyres and to Murray & Cochrane in Edinburgh. The print orders were substantial; in 1807 Johnson ordered 2000 more copies of *The Olney Hymns* from Murray & Cochrane, 750 more copies of *Cardiphonia* and 250 copies of Newton's entire *Works* in nine volumes.

As for the five previously unpublished letters to William Cowper, four come from the Hannay Collection at the Firestone Library at Princeton, and one from the Morgan Library in New York. The first dates from 1782, when Johnson was already at work on the publication of Cowper's first volume of poems. It is clear from Cowper's published letters that he was impressed by the quality of Johnson's editing. He had written to John Newton on 25 August 1781 to praise his new bookseller:

I forgot to mention that Johnson uses the discretion my poetship has allowed him with much discernment. He has suggested several alterations, or rather marked several defective passages which I have corrected much to the advantage of the poems.³

Thanks to Bugg's inclusion of these extra letters we can now understand at first hand Johnson's reluctance to include Newton's intended preface to the *Poems*. On 18 February 1782 Johnson wrote to Cowper to warn that the preface 'will infallibly prejudice the critics against the work before they have read a line, & their judgment has no small influence on the success of poetical compositions'. He does at the same time acknowledge 'Mr N's genius & worth'. Evidently, despite Johnson's own nonconformist background he was sensitive to contemporary Anglican antipathy to evangelicalism.

Any letters that Johnson might have written to Cowper about the lack of success of the 1782 *Poems*, or the remarkable success of the second volume containing *The Task*, published by Johnson in 1786, are yet to be found. And there are no references in the *Letterbook* to any payments owing to Cowper; Johnson of course had published the *Poems* at his own risk and Cowper was paid nothing for them. But, also undocumented in the *Letterbook*, when in 1793 Johnson published a fifth edition of *The Task* he presented Cowper with the profit.⁴

The second unpublished letter that Bugg provides is dated 17 September 1788. Johnson refers to Cowper's preoccupation with his translation of Homer and encloses an unnamed manuscript for him to look at. The remaining three letters, all from the Hannay Collection and dated 1791, refer to Johnson's plan for a 'Milton Gallery' to rival Boydell's successful Shakespeare Gallery. Johnson proposed that Henry Fuseli would provide the illustrations. Cowper subsequently agreed to act as editor and to provide translations of Milton's Latin and Italian poems, a project that he continued to work on until his death in 1800.

Cowper and Johnson never met. Cowper did however invite Johnson to visit Weston Underwood in the summer of 1791. Johnson responded to the invitation on 22 August that year:

I thank you very much for your kindness, there is no excursion for me this summer, my first and last officers are both ill, & I think it my duty rather to work double tides than dismiss a servant for the visitation of God.

I am Dr Sir

Yr obedt

J. Johnson

The Milton project was to bring Cowper into contact with his future biographer William Hayley. The *Letterbook* includes several mentions of the publication of *The Life of Cowper*, one of the few books that Johnson published for which he failed to obtain copyright. According to Hayley's own *Memoirs*, in 1801 Johnson travelled to Hayley's house at Felpham in Sussex by post-chaise to meet him and discuss terms. Hayley described the meeting thus:

Terms were soon adjusted with the author, when Johnson, after an ineffectual contest, acquiesced in the positive requisition of Hayley to have his work printed in his native city of Chichester.⁵

For Johnson it must have been an unsatisfactory meeting. Unusually, Johnson's role was restricted to distributing the book rather than editing it and having it printed; 'You are sensible I have not interfered in the slightest manner in the work in which you are engaged', he wrote to Hayley on 4 January 1802, while offering him the benefit of his forty years' experience as a bookseller. Later, in January 1807, he was to advise one of his authors, Elizabeth Hamilton of Edinburgh, that 'A partnership between author and bookseller I do not recommend. It rarely turns out satisfactory'. He advised Miss Hamilton that authors should cede control of publication to their bookseller, presumably in return for an agreed fee.

... the Authors have nothing to do but to send their manuscript in a legible state to the bookseller; furnishing paper and employing a printer and corrector of the press, advertising, vending, in short, everything else will be his business.

John Bugg's edition of the *Letterbook* is, as one would hope from Oxford University Press, elegantly produced, with generous notes and some useful supporting appendices. There are twelve black and white illustrations. The four appendices include business letters written after Johnson's death, no doubt using up some spare pages at a time when paper was expensive. Bugg also provides a hard-to-locate account of Johnson's dinners by an American visitor, William Austin, taken from *Letters from London Written During the Years 1802 & 1803* (Boston, 1804). Austin found himself dining at Johnson's house in St Paul's Churchyard alongside Johnson's two great friends, the painter Fuseli

and the mathematician John Bonnycastle. The conversation ranged far and wide, but as Austin writes, ‘The English don’t say much till the first course is finished. But their manner of eating soon throws them into a gentle fever, which invites to sociability, when they have sufficient confidence in their company’.

The mention of Johnson’s friends Fuseli and Bonnycastle is significant. When Johnson died they were beneficiaries in Johnson’s will. Johnson died a comparatively wealthy man, no doubt thanks in part to his ownership of Cowper’s copyrights. His estate was valued at £60,000, and Bugg refers to the division of the estate between friends and family, making reference to an often-quoted article by Phyllis Mann, ‘Death of a London Bookseller’⁶. The business, to be known as J. Johnson and Co. was put into the hands of Johnson’s assistants, his great-nephews John Miles and Rowland Hunter. But neither Mann nor Bugg were perhaps aware of a privately-printed collection of papers put together by Johnson’s nephew, also called Joseph Johnson, who was co-executor of the estate with Miles and Hunter. The collection, ‘References to the Case of Mr Fuseli’s Legacy under the will of the late Joseph Johnson’ lurks in the British Library, awaiting a full study.

Hunter and Miles did their best to exclude their co-executor from the settlement of the estate, and he found it necessary to contest the will in the Ecclesiastical Courts. He accused Miles and Hunter of failing to hand over the promised legacies to Fuseli and Bonnycastle, and of withholding information about the copyrights owned by the company. He had their correspondence printed as a record, in readiness for the lawsuit. The bound compilation includes sensational accounts, ‘printed and sold by all Booksellers and Newsmen, 1817, Price One Shilling’, of a fraud committed by Miles and brought before the Court of Chancery in 1817. Despite this, the company lingered on until it was taken over by Simpkin, Marshall & Co, whose records were apparently destroyed in World War II. How this one *Letterbook* survived remains unknown.

The only other small criticism one might have of this otherwise excellent edition is of the index, which is underwhelming, at least in reference to William Cowper. The *Letterbook* contains at least two letters written by Johnson in 1796, to Messrs Morison of Perth who had printed Cowper’s poems without permission, perhaps misunderstanding

how Johnson had registered the copyright of the poems. Similarly Johnson's copyright dispute with Joseph Cottle, the Bristol-based publisher of Wordsworth and Coleridge, is not indexed under Cowper's name. Such piracy was an important indicator of Cowper's popularity. Johnson's fury at the theft is evident from his letter to Cottle, dated 6 December 1804: 'Had you, in your collection, taken thirty or even sixty lines from Cowper I should not have objected, but you have taken nearly one thousand, this is insufferable...'

But despite these minor criticisms, this edition of Joseph Johnson's *Letterbook* is a magnificent addition to our understanding of the history of publishing in this period and a work of real scholarship. Beg, borrow, or better still buy, a copy.

Notes

- ¹ Leslie Chard, 'Joseph Johnson: Father of the Book Trade', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 79 (1975), 82.
- ² I am indebted to Marylynn Rouse of the John Newton Project for this reference.
- ³ *Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), I, 513.
- ⁴ Russell, Norma, *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1963), 45.
- ⁵ William Hayley, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of William Hayley, Esq., the Friend and Biographer of Cowper*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1823), II, 32.
- ⁶ *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, 15 (1964), 9.