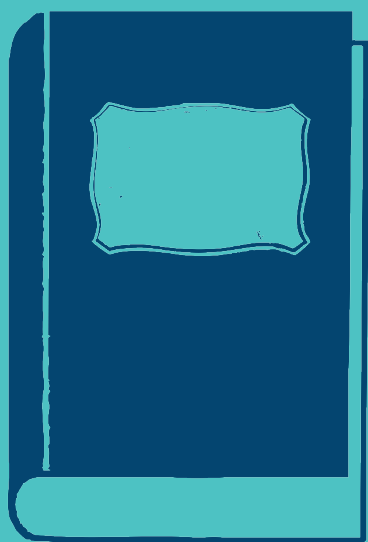




BOSWELL



BY **MARIE KOHLER**

DIRECTED BY **LAURA GORDON**

NOVEMBER 19 - DECEMBER 14, 2025

AUDIENCE GUIDE

WELCOME!

Dear Next Act Patrons,

Welcome to Next Act Theatre!

We are delighted to present *BOSWELL* by Wisconsin's own Marie Kohler, whose play received four-star reviews at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and enjoyed a sold-out Off-Broadway run.

Directed by the incomparable Laura Gordon, this sharp and playful comedy follows Joan, an American graduate student who journeys to a Scottish noblewoman's estate in the 1950s to research the writings of Samuel Johnson. Instead, she uncovers the often-bawdy 1760s journals of James Boswell—long hidden in the attic by his embarrassed descendants. Coaxed by her new friend, Joan pores over Boswell's wild adventures in the Scottish Hebrides and moves toward a life of greater authenticity. Heart and mind spar wittily in this two-period dramedy about friendship, travel, and the written word.

In this guide, you'll find background and historical context designed to help you connect even more deeply with what unfolds on stage.

As always, please note that this guide includes discussions of plot elements that could be considered "spoilers."

Enjoy the show,

*Elyse Edelman, Artistic Associate
A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director
and the Artistic Team at Next Act*

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THE REAL FIGURES

Who Were Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, and What Was Their Relationship?



Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784, was a widely loved humorist, curmudgeon, critic, essayist, poet, biographer and lexicographer who the *Encyclopedia Britannica* said “was regarded as one of the greatest figures of 18th-century life and letters.” He spent several years compiling his dictionary of the English language.

Samuel Johnson. By Joshua Reynolds - Tate Gallery. Copy held by Pembroke College, Oxford. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=671175>

James Boswell, 1740-1795, was the rakish and ne’er-do-well son of a Scottish lord who met Johnson in London and became his friend, traveling companion and biographer. Less than wealthy and less than successful as a lawyer, he had a rocky relationship with his father and family. He was a compulsive diarist, interviewer, note-taker and obsequious social climber whose vast writings were the basis of his book *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, which is a classic of English letters.

James Boswell of Auchinleck. By Joshua Reynolds - National Portrait Gallery. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21442214>

Who Were The Other Famous Personages in The Play?

Joshua Reynolds, 1723-1792, was a portrait painter and aesthetician who dominated English artistic life in the middle and late 18th century. After the founding of the Royal Academy, Reynolds was elected its first president. His paintings today are displayed in major museums around the world.

David Hume, 1711-1776, was a Scottish philosopher, historian, economist and essayist known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism. Hume conceived of philosophy as the inductive, experimental science of human nature. His most famous book today, not well received when first published, is *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

Oliver Goldsmith, 1730-1774, was an Anglo-Irish essayist, poet, novelist, dramatist and eccentric made famous by such works as the play *SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER*, a comedy of misunderstandings.

David Garrick, 1717-1779, was an English actor, producer, dramatist, poet and co-manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. In the 18th century, his fame in England was second only to that of King George III.

PERSONAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James Boswell's Family

James' father, Alexander Boswell, the 8th Laird of Auchinleck, consistently looked askance at James, either for not making good career moves, or not doing as well as was expected of him. The Laird was a prominent Scottish judge.

James and his wife, Margaret, were actually cousins. James was a mercurial character who went back and forth from energetic highs to insoluble depressions. He was a chronic philanderer and on occasion regretted not being a better husband. James and Margaret had 7 children, 2 of whom died in infancy. Margaret died of tuberculosis in 1789 when James was traveling back to Scotland.

James and Margaret Boswell and three of their children. Group portrait by Henry Singleton - National Galleries. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=101614567>



Were Scotland and England Fully Integrated with each other at the time of Johnson and Boswell?

No. There continues to be a separatist strain in Scotland today, and there are distinct dialectal and cultural between Scotland and England. The formation of "Great Britain" was a much newer thing at the time of Johnson and Boswell. There had been a revolt led by the Scottish pretender to the throne – known as Bonnie Prince Charlie – in 1745. It secured highlander support and captured Edinburgh before being quashed. Scotland was then a more remote, separate place and was less prosperous and vibrant than London. Boswell was one of many Scots who gravitated to, and sometimes lived in, London back then to gain fun, fame and fortune, often to the chagrin of the locals. Johnson, a world-class banterer, was known to convey a skittish, negative attitude toward Scotland. But his friendship with the Scot Boswell was warm, and he relished their travels around Scotland together, as depicted in the play. Their 1773 circuit around the isles, highlands and Edinburgh was the subject of books by each of them.

More History

Around the time of the American Revolution and the height of the Boswell-Johnson friendship, about 750,000 people were living in London, not many more than the population of Milwaukee today. London was a world-renowned capitol and source of great culture and wealth, and the center of a world-wide empire. But, it was also a filthy mess thanks to the horse traffic.

In the 1950s (when Joan's story is set), the University of Chicago was a highly regarded center of learning and a major research university - as it still is today. It was unusual at that time for women to be making their way up the ranks of academia. They were outsiders.

Scotland retained a strong independent streak in the 1950s. On Christmas Day, 1950, students from the University of Glasgow stole the Stone of Destiny – a venerated symbol of Scotland's founding – from Westminster Abbey in London. It was located and returned before the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. Today it is back in Scotland.

INTERESTING DATES IN SCOTTISH HISTORY FROM THE 1700S

29 October, 1740

James Boswell, the lawyer, diarist, traveler and author, is born in Edinburgh.

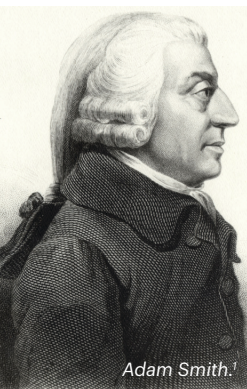


6 July, 1747

John Paul Jones is born at Arbigland. He will go on to become the first US naval hero of the American Revolution, and in many eyes, the father of the US Navy.

1 August, 1747

The Act of Proscription prohibits the wearing of highland garb, in particular tartans and kilts, except within the army.



9 March, 1776

An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations is published, becoming the best known work of economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith.

July 4, 1776

13 American Colonies Declare Independence From Great Britain.

25 August, 1776

The death of David Hume, generally regarded as the most important philosopher ever to write in English.

1 July, 1782

The Act of Proscription is repealed and the kilt and wearing of tartans comes into more general use.

¹From etching created by Cadell and Davies (1811), John Horsburgh (1828) or R.C. Bell (1872). Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=497250>

²By John Trumbull - US Capitol, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=180069>

³By Allan Ramsay - National Galleries Scotland, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=121570170>

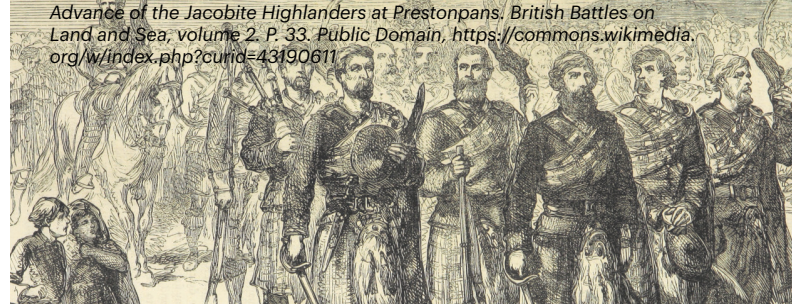
16 September, 1745

The Jacobites take Edinburgh without a fight.

20 December, 1745

The Jacobite army, heading north after reaching Derby, retreats into Scotland.

Advance of the Jacobite Highlanders at Prestonpans. British Battles on Land and Sea, volume 2. P. 33. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43190611>



14 May, 1754

Golf is formalized at St Andrews with the foundation of the St Andrews Society of Golfers.

1760

The Highland Clearances gain momentum. The pressure on highlanders, through increased rents and more direct means, to leave the land results in 20,000 emigrating by 1773, many for Canada and other colonies.

25 October, 1760

King George II dies: he is succeeded by King George III.



King George III. By Allan Ramsay - <https://commons.m.wikimedia.org>, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=132821814>

15 August, 1771

Sir Walter Scott, the world's first international literary superstar, is born in Edinburgh.

18 August, 1773

Samuel Johnson and James Boswell set out on their three month tour of the Highlands and the Inner Hebrides, of which both subsequently write detailed accounts.



13 December, 1784

The death, in London, of Samuel Johnson, the English author, journalist and literary critic.

THE REDISCOVERY OF BOSWELL

A Discovery Likened to King Tut's Tomb

The discovery of Boswell's papers in modern times was like the discovery of King Tut's tomb, according Adam Sisman, author of the book *Boswell's Presumptuous Task: The Making of the Life of Dr. Johnson*. He wrote:

"For the first hundred years or so after *The Life of Johnson* was published, critics tended to take the line that it was a great book written by a simpleton who just happened to be in the right place at the right time. The set-piece conversations seemed no more than a naïve record. Then a succession of astonishing finds – the literary equivalent of the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb – revealed a colossal hoard of Boswell manuscripts, including the manuscripts of *The Life of Johnson* and its precursor *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, and his journals, among the most revealing ever written. We now have much more information about the biographer than we do about his subject. From being regarded as a little man who wrote a great book, Boswell came to be seen as an important literary figure, a pioneer of modern biography – and of autobiography, for the focus of academic interest has shifted from subject to author, from Boswell's books to his journals and manuscripts."



Madeline Calais-King in rehearsal for BOSWELL. Photo by A.J. Magoon



Malahide Castle. By Dieglop - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=110199152>

The Yale Boswell Editions

While the play is a fictional account with its own artistic license, expansive themes, and magic, it is faithful to the history and flavor of the Boswell-Johnson relationship and of the unearthing of Boswell's papers, a huge trove of which were ultimately purchased by Yale University in 1949. Begun to house and publish volumes from of the papers, the project of The Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell was terminated by the Yale administration in 2021, apparently for financial reasons. The papers are still held at Yale in its Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. A history of the project on the Yale website provides the following account:

"It had been known that Boswell left behind a large collection of letters and journals, but these were thought to have been destroyed. In the 1920s and 1930s, the scholarly world learned that James Boswell's considerable archives had survived and were, as it happened, unceremoniously packed away in the haylofts and croquet boxes of his descendants at Malahide Castle in Ireland and Fettercairn House in Scotland. The process of persuading Boswell's descendants to part with the papers and then assembling them into one collection was the achievement of the intrepid American collector Ralph Heyward Isham. Colonel Isham's mission, costly and often frustrating, would take the better part of two decades to complete."

The broad and deep archive ranges from the scholarly and intellectual to the salty and earthy, according to the Yale website, and is "populated with petty thieves and notorious confidence tricksters, provincial clergymen and estate laborers, Grub Street hacks and men and women of great distinction, streetwalkers and innkeepers, princes, lords, and their servants."



Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library Interior. By Gunnar Klack. CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=84223002>

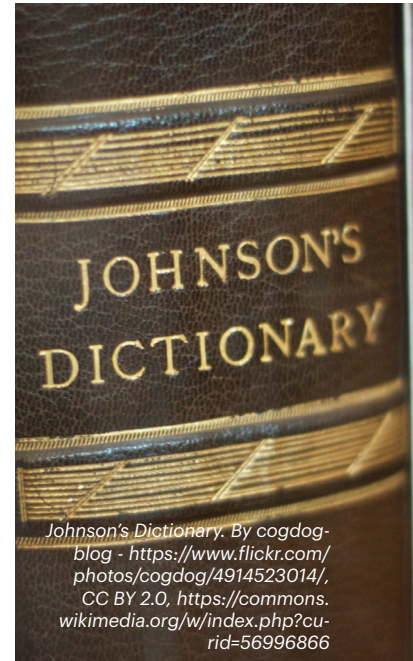
LANGUAGE AND LEGACY

Johnson, His Dictionary and Shakespeare

Johnson devoted several years of his life to putting together a landmark dictionary of the English language, for which he undertook far reaching research about the literary and other sources of words. He was later known as "Dictionary Johnson."

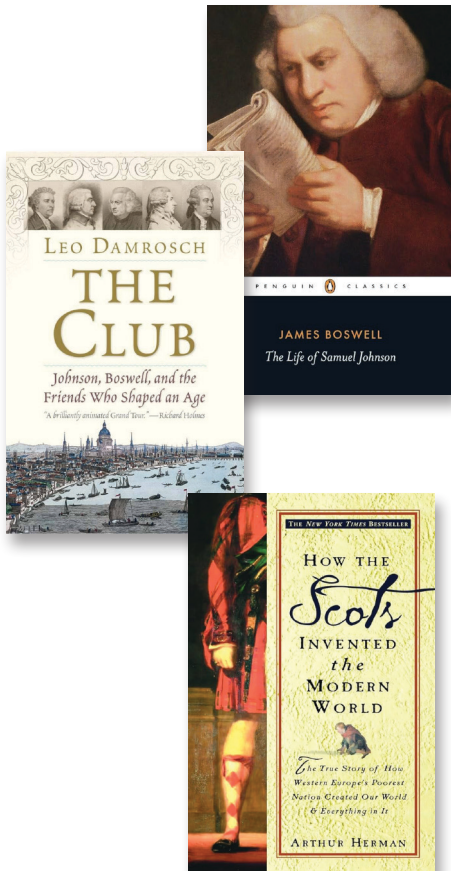
Johnson later published an eight-volume annotated edition of Shakespeare's works. Britannica says Johnson "edited and annotated the text and wrote a preface, which is his greatest work of literary criticism. As editor and annotator he sought to establish the text, freed from later corruptions, and to explain diction that by then had become obsolete and obscure. Johnson's approach was to immerse himself in the books Shakespeare had read—his extensive reading for his Dictionary eased this task." Shakespeare had been dead about 160 years before Johnson's work appeared.

It's interesting that so little is known about the day-to-day events of Shakespeare's life while, thanks in great part to Boswell, much of Johnson's daily doings are recorded in extensive detail.



MARIE KOHLER'S BOSWELL READING LIST

***FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN THE SUBJECT OF JAMES BOSWELL
OR DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON***



THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON
James Boswell

BOSWELL'S LONDON JOURNAL, 1762-1763
James Boswell (& many subsequent years!)

A JOURNEY TO THE WESTERN ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND
Samuel Johnson

A JOURNAL OF THE TOUR TO THE HEBRIDES
James Boswell

A LIFE OF JAMES BOSWELL
Peter Martin

***THE CLUB: JOHNSON, BOSWELL,
AND THE FRIENDS WHO SHAPED AN AGE***
Leo Damrosch

***DEFINING THE WORLD -
THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF DR. JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY***
Henry Hitchings

***BOSWELL'S PRESUMPTUOUS TASK -
THE MAKING OF THE LIFE OF DR. JOHNSON***
Adam Sisman

HOW THE SCOTS INVENTED THE MODERN WORLD
Arthur Herman

QUOTATIONS FROM SAMUEL JOHNSON

"If slavery be thus fatally contagious, how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"

From Taxation, No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress, 1775

"A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people."

Definition of "Oats" from his Dictionary of the English Language

"Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last."

"I hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am."

"He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man."

"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure"

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

"Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect."

"A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it."

"Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford."

"My congratulations to you, sir. Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good."

"The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken."

"I never desire to converse with a man who has written more than he has read."

"There can be no friendship without confidence, and no confidence without integrity."

"Whoever thinks of going to bed before twelve o'clock is a scoundrel."

"Few things are impossible to diligence and skill. Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance."

"Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful."

"Almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble."

"Hell is paved with good intentions."

"I would rather be attacked than unnoticed. For the worst thing you can do to an author is to be silent as to his works."

"It is better to suffer wrong than to do it, and happier to be sometimes cheated than not to trust."

"You raise your voice when you should reinforce your argument."

"To keep your secret is wisdom, but to expect others to keep it is folly."

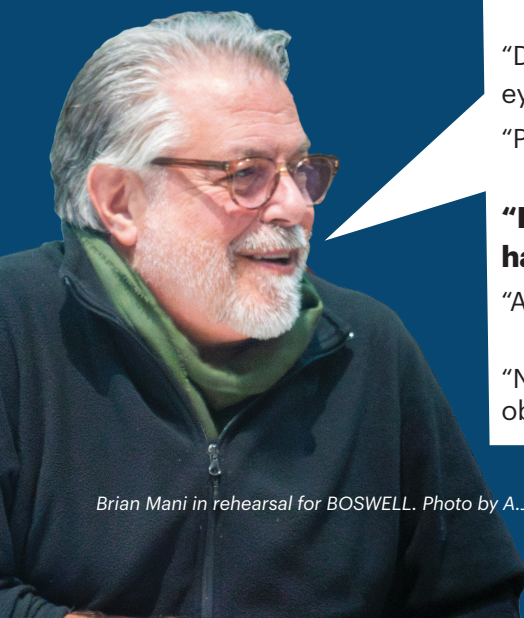
"Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye."

"People need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed."

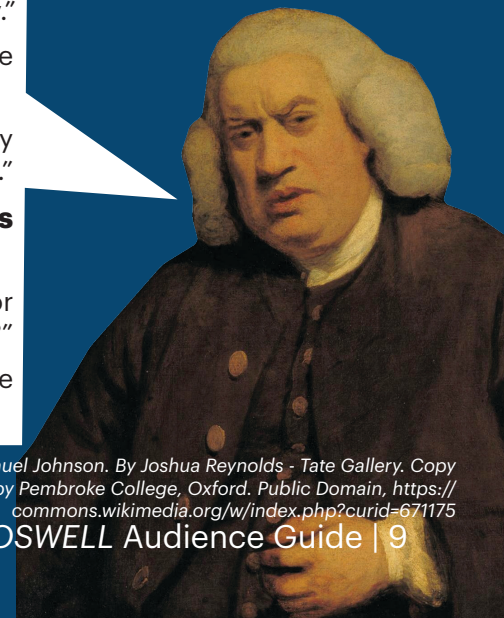
"It is necessary to hope... for hope itself is happiness."

"Allow children to be happy in their own way, for what better way will they find?"

"Nothing [...] will ever be attempted, if all possible objections must be first overcome."



Brian Mani in rehearsal for BOSWELL. Photo by A.J. Magoon



Samuel Johnson. By Joshua Reynolds - Tate Gallery. Copy held by Pembroke College, Oxford. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=671175>

FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

Playwright Marie Kohler.

Playwright's Casting Notes

From the Script of BOSWELL

Since the plight of an outsider is one of this play's main themes, Boswell could be well served by a racially and ethnically diverse cast. It would be meaningful if Joan comes from an American background that is historically marginalized. In the play's Edinburgh Fringe production, the role of Joan was played as Jewish American. In the Off-Broadway production, the role of Joan was played by and co-developed with a Latina-American actor ... We drew on respective cultural backgrounds for certain lines of Joan's ... While the roles of Boswell and Johnson may be cast with actors of any race or ethnicity, they should stay true to the characters' historical regional accents. If you trust the language and themes of the play, you will be getting at her heart.



Boswell and Johnson spend August 31 and September 1 at Anoch, the only location mentioned in their journals which cannot now be definitively located. Boswell suggests that a house in Glenmorison, 11 miles from Fort Augustus, was called Anoch and was kept by a man belonging to the M'Queen tribe. Nowadays, it is unclear exactly where this house would have been located.

Johnson is pleased to visit these sites, which feature prominently in William Shakespeare's *MACBETH*.

"This to an Englishman is classic ground. Our imaginations were heated, and our thoughts recalled to their old amusements."

Johnson, Samuel, *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/usebooks/johnson-westernisles/index.html>, Accessed 2 Oct. 2025.

"You recite the Bard quite meaningfully, sir."

Kohler, Marie, *Boswell*, Dramatic Publishing Company, 2024

In the midst of Boswell and Johnson's travels, playwright Marie Kohler sets *Joan*, a University of Chicago grad student in the 1950s researching the pair. In the play, she finds a trove of previously-undiscovered Boswell journals at the Auchinleck estate. In real life, the journals were discovered at Ireland's Malahide Castle.

In the island of Iona. Our ride over stormy waters, was the best we have known. By silver light, we find our refuge ... near a graveyard. They say Macbeth is buried here, among other highland chiefs."

Kohler, Marie, *Boswell*, Dramatic Publishing Company, 2024

Boswell and Johnson stay on Iona on September 19 - 21. In Marie's play, Iona serves as an important backdrop for development of their friendship.

Boswell and Johnson begin their journey in Edinburgh, with Johnson arriving on August 14, 1773 and the pair departing North to Inch Keith on August 18. They will not return until their trip

Kohler, Marie. Boswell. Dramatic Publishing Company, 2024

In real life,
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Kohler, Marie. Boswell. Dramatic Publishing Company, 2024

Kohler, Marie. Boswell. Dramatic Publishing Company, 2024.

Boswell and Johnson begin their journey in Edinburgh, with Johnson arriving on August 14, 1773 and the pair departing North to Inch Keith on August 18. They will not return until their trip concludes on November 9. In Marie's play, the pair spend their time in Edinburgh meeting the philosopher David Hume and are entertained by Boswell's wife, Margaret, in the Boswells' Edinburgh rooms.

Information sourced from:
Undiscovered Scotland,
www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/.



BOSWELL

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