

A Monument More Durable Than Brass

One of the most memorable moments of my graduate career occurred during the seminar “Johnson and His Circle.” Our professor, an intense young up-and-comer, was describing Samuel Johnson’s pain-filled last days when “dropsy”—fluid build-up—had the doctor in such agony that he stabbed himself in the calf to relieve the pressure. Stroke, gout and other complications preceded coma and death on December 13, 1784. But what stunned the dozen graduate students assembled was the professor’s emotional telling, which so moved him he had to pause mid-narrative to compose himself. None of us had ever witnessed such professorial passion before.

What was it about this 18th century British critic, essayist, poet, biographer and lexicographer; often referred to simply as “Dr. Johnson” or the “Great Cham”; that incited such heartfelt devotion? Unless you’re a Johnsonian, as I soon became, the attachment is difficult to explain.

For me, Johnson perfectly embodies that rich and complex long-ago age; his various writings at once forceful, intellectual and elegant, yet still accessible and down to earth. In Overholt and Horrocks’ *A Monument More Durable Than Brass*, Mary and Donald Hyde’s legendary Johnson collection, recently bequeathed to Harvard’s Houghton Library, is lovingly assembled.

Attorney Donald Hyde (1909-66) and philanthropist Mary Hyde (1912-2003) began collecting Johnsonia in 1940, a time when the gettin’ was—well, not good, but *extraordinary*. When James Boswell’s Malahide Castle and Fettercairn House in Scotland began spewing astonishing trunks of the choicest Johnson manuscripts and other rarities no one knew existed, the Hydes were there; and their deep pockets served them well. Donald died from cancer in 1966, but for the next 35 years, Mary continued adding to the collection. In 2004, her collection and a \$15 million endowment landed at Harvard.

Editor Horrocks’ introduction makes

this remarkable collecting couple vivid. He also reminds us that “The treasures on view in this exhibition comprise a mere fraction of the magnificent Hyde Collection. And what an impressive fraction it is. Overholt presents an astonishing array of books, manuscripts, prints, ephemera, and art that... represents sixty years of painstaking effort on the part of Mary Hyde Eccles...”

Scholar James Engell’s essay “Perdurable Johnson” reviews Johnson’s broad literary output, while William Zachs’ “The Hydes Collection Johnson” is a how-to case study about creating a first-rate literary collection when price is little object.

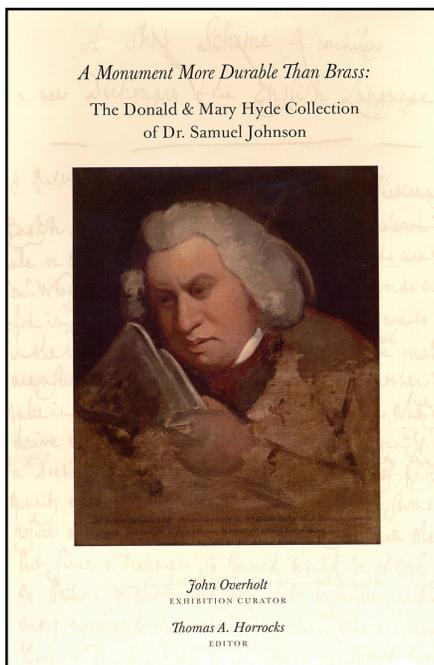
As with any exhibition catalogue, the joy lies in the items illustrated and their descriptions. While almost no exhibition catalogue illustrates every single item, *A Monument More Durable Than Brass* certainly doesn’t disappoint in its generous sampling of high

quality, color illustrations. It’s a pleasing mix of documents, books, personal items and portraits—well arranged, beautifully photographed and presented.

What a thrill to behold Johnson’s holograph translation of a Horace poem, accomplished at age 17. Or two of his diaries, “the earliest to have survived”; the first labeled *Annales* “a simple accounting, in Latin, of the major events in his life,” 1731. The second, labeled *Libellus*, dates 1729-34, and begins movingly with (in Latin) “I bid farewell to Sloth, being resolved henceforth not to listen to her syren strains.”

Another delightful favorite, as bizarre as it is humorous and humble, is an illustration of a rudely torn out upper corner from one page of Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. Why this detritus amidst such glorious fare? Because, as Overholt informs us, “Even the greatest works may sometimes come to an inglorious end. Boswell’s note on this scrap of the *Dictionary* records that ‘Matthew Henderson found this in a Littlehouse [i.e., a privy] at Edinburgh & twitted me with my Great Friend’s Work being Wastepaper.’”

If *A Monument More Durable Than Brass* and Samuel Johnson still aren’t your “dish of tea” (to cite Johnson’s ditty to his favorite beverage), keep in mind: The greatest Samuel Johnson treasure of all... the Holy of Holies to Johnsonians... *has never been found*. All of Johnson’s letters to Boswell, numbering more than two hundred, plus Boswell’s replies (as published extensively in his *Life of Johnson*), “have not been seen since Boswell’s death... their whereabouts remains unknown.” And if that specter isn’t enough, there’s even a guaranteed buyer for this cache afoot: Harvard University. “Such were Mary’s persistent thoughts on the matter,” writes Overholt, “that in her will, the terms of the Harvard bequest stipulated that funds from the principal of the \$15 million endowment could be invaded to secure the Johnson-Boswell letters were they ever to come to light.” Surely *that’s* worth getting excited about? 



OVERHOLT, John (exhibition curator) and HORROCKS, Thomas A. (editor). *A Monument More Durable Than Brass: The Donald & Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson – An Exhibition*. Cambridge: Houghton Library, Harvard University, 2009. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. vii, 127pp. Color illustrations. \$35.00.