



A literary party hosted by the painter Joshua Reynolds in 1781 and featuring many members of the Club.

From a painting by James William Edmund Doyle.

**By Lyndall Gordon**

April 5, 2019 *New York Times*

## **THE CLUB**

### **Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age**

By Leo Damrosch

“O conversation the staff of life,” the young T. S. Eliot wrote to his Harvard friend and fellow poet Conrad Aiken in 1914. “Shall I get any at Oxford?” A newcomer to England, Eliot looked to London as a city that once had been a center of civilization. There, conversation among thinkers fizzing with originality had its acme in a club founded in 1764 by the dictionary-maker Samuel Johnson and the portrait painter Joshua Reynolds. They asked seven more friends to meet each Friday at the Turk’s Head Tavern in Gerrard Street, to talk, dine and drink till midnight.

In “The Club,” the American literary scholar Leo Damrosch brilliantly brings together the members’ voices. They air their opinions with the aplomb of thinkers who relish the English language, roll its tones and innuendos about their tongues and have the alertness to listen as well as speak. For, as Leslie Stephen remarked in 1878 (in a vivid chapter on “Johnson and His Friends” in his own biography of Johnson), “a good talker, even more than a good orator, implies a good audience.”

The nine founding members of the Club joined quite early in their careers. Johnson had yet to write his masterpiece, “Lives of the Poets” (prompted in part by a conversation with King George III, who, in Boswell’s account, expressed “a desire to have the literary biography of this country ably executed”); Oliver Goldsmith had yet to publish the novel that would make his name, “The Vicar of Wakefield”; and Edmund Burke had yet to find renown as a parliamentary orator. Neither fame nor public position was required, and yet a surprising number of these friends would rise to lasting greatness. Elections were made by unanimous vote. Those of James Boswell, David Garrick and Adam Smith in the 1770s expanded the group to include the greatest biographer, the greatest actor and the greatest economist of the century.

Beginning with the friendship between Johnson, the

moralist, and Boswell, his promiscuous future biographer — a connection that was initially forged outside the Club — Damrosch breathes life into “The Friends Who Shaped an Age” (in his subtitle’s phrase). As this stellar book moves from one Club member to another, it comes together as an ambitious venture homing in on the nature of creative stimulus. In his [award-winning life of Swift](#) and, more recently, in “[Eternity’s Sunrise,](#)” his study [of Blake](#), Damrosch approaches his subjects as creatures of their “world”; a group portrait is a logical sequel. Here are multiple, deeply researched biographies in one. Resonating beyond the well-documented links among these leading lights, “The Club” captures their distinctly individual voices and invites us to feel the pulsations of contact over a period of 20 years. What made this collaborative pulse so strong across many fields?

Although it’s impossible to explain genius, and although not all members deserved that label, the question is implicit in Damrosch’s portraits of the group’s defining figures. “The Club” accurately recreates a milieu keen on character, egged on by the English taste for unashamed eccentricity. The impact of Johnson’s sonorous pronouncements — “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life” — is in no way diminished by his compulsive tics, slovenly clothes and a wig singed from bending too close to a candle to examine a text. Damrosch is equal to his characters, considering their comments

from our vantage point, especially our present awareness of women's lives.

Inevitably, certain opinions are alien, even offensive to modern ears: Johnson's invoking the phrase "barbarous nations" to describe the victims of Britain's imperial wars; his dismissal of the American colonists' protest against taxation without representation; and, despite sympathizing with Native Americans whose lands were being wrested from them, his refusal to suggest that these lands should be returned to them.



Regarding women, all these 18th-century British men endorsed a double standard. Women, Johnson said bluntly, must be taught to keep their legs together. The rationale was pragmatic: to secure the line of inheritance that kept property in male hands. We read on because we are drawn by the alluring drama of character. This drama is biographical, not political.

Character includes ambiguity and defects. There is abundant evidence of Boswell's habit of abusing girls, many of them orphans and desperate for sixpence. Yet Damrosch rightly keeps the focus on Boswell the "impresario," who drew on his training as a lawyer to spark new topics of conversation, and, of course, on Boswell the avid recorder. His "Journal" is astonishingly candid about his failings and humiliations, as when Rousseau's partner, Thérèse, who once slept with Boswell while en route from France to England, tells him how clueless he is as a lover. (She advises him to use his hands.)

The Club, eventually renamed the London Literary Society, has continued to this day but never again lived up to its glory years. Johnson died in 1784. Toward the end, he attended only about three times a year. It's telling that by 1783 membership had swollen to 35. Many of the members were highly gifted, including the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, author of "The School for Scandal," and the historian Edward Gibbon. No doubt the intimacy of the earlier, smaller group worked better for Johnson.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Club's members were largely politicians and other public figures. The poet laureate Tennyson was there, but not Dickens. The election of T. S. Eliot, in 1942, came rather late

in his career as a poet. And then, too, as Damrosch points out, there was no George Eliot, no Virginia Woolf: “It never ceased to be a club for men.” He compensates for this exclusion by focusing on the women who formed what he calls a “shadow club.” The artist Frances Reynolds (Joshua’s able but suppressed sister) affirmed that Johnson “set a higher value upon female friendship than, perhaps, most men.” Among such friends were the bluestocking Elizabeth Carter and the novelist Fanny Burney. Johnson offered to teach Burney Latin, but her father (a member of the Club) refused. Burney’s friend Hester Thrale said that Burney’s father thought Latin “too masculine for Misses.”

Thrale became Johnson’s closest confidante and “therapist” when spiritual terrors came to torment him. Aware how unbearable it was for him to be alone, Thrale took him to live with her and her wealthy husband, Henry, at Streatham Place, south of London. There, for the last 15 years of his life, listened to, respected and revered, Johnson could count on Thrale, who was, like him, a passionate moral being and literate companion. He was soothed by domestic affection and enjoyed the stimulus of mixed company, an alternative to the Club.

Looking at this book’s list of chapters, I wondered at first why the portrait of Gibbon comes toward the end. He was elected to the Club in 1774, while writing the first volume of his “History of the Decline

and Fall of the Roman Empire.” The book was recognized at once as a classic, combining extraordinary breadth with what Gibbon calls “the art of narrating.” As Damrosch puts it, Gibbon broke with “tedious chronicles of fact,” maintaining a “storytelling momentum” that is “constantly enlivened by memorable incidents and characterizations.” This could be a description of Damrosch’s own achievement. The best historians, he goes on, invite readers to accompany them “behind the scenes.” Damrosch does precisely that here, and the chapter makes a fitting near-finale to a book that sustains a shared conversation, a terrific feat in keeping with that of the Club itself.