

Consider the Publisher: Joseph Johnson

Miranda Seymour [The New York Review of Books](#) April 20, 2023

Behind Mary Wollstonecraft was a courageous publisher and his network of eighteenth-century London's most radical minds.

Reviewed: [**Dinner with Joseph Johnson: Books and Friendship in a Revolutionary Age**](#) by Daisy Hay

If asked to identify a Johnson who held celebrated dinners in eighteenth-century London, most of us would suggest the convivial cohost of a Soho dining club that attracted luminaries of their professions like the actor David Garrick, the Whig politician Charles James Fox, and the historian Edward Gibbon. Technically speaking, it was Samuel Johnson's friend the great portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds who started that genial institution—known simply as the Club—in 1764. But thanks to the indefatigably attentive James Boswell, it's Dr. Johnson who looms largest in our imaginings of their robustly masculine circle. (If women did attend the Soho gatherings, their only official task was to refill the club members' wineglasses.)

Today we might feel happier setting out to dine with Daisy Hay's intriguing subject, Joseph Johnson, a courageous publisher best known for the unfailing help and support he provided to the young and struggling Mary Wollstonecraft. Dining at three in the afternoon might not suit everyone's taste, while few restaurant critics would extol the virtues of "the true citizens' dinner" Johnson favored: boiled cod, roast veal, and rice pudding. But who among us would decline the opportunity for a cozy private chat with Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Henry Fuseli, Joseph Priestley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (a guest at Johnson's table over a happy fortnight of visits), or Tom Paine? And which of us, listening to Fuseli, always the dominant guest at Johnson's dinners, and staring at the Swiss-born artist's unnervingly sexy painting *The Nightmare* (1781) suspended above our host's sedate square face in its frame of neat gray sausage curls, would not agree that the quiet little publisher was just as remarkable as his older namesake? (Samuel Johnson died in 1784, when Joseph was forty-six; surprisingly, the two Johnsons never met.)

Hay's first book was *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives* (2010), a beguiling study of the generation of writers who followed Coleridge and Wordsworth, both of whom submitted poems to Joseph Johnson during the 1790s. In *Dinner with Joseph Johnson*, drawing upon a body of scholarly research into Johnson's significance that began fifty years ago and culminated in William St. Clair's magnificently authoritative *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004), Hay has produced an enlightening biography. Her detailed portrait of Johnson illuminates the considerable risks faced by a London publisher bold enough to defy the repressive laws issued by the nervous British government at a time when revolution seemed worryingly likely to spread from France to England.

Johnson isn't an obvious hero. Born in 1738 into a Baptist family in a Liverpool suburb, he knew from the inside the troubled world of the Dissenters—people whose nonconformist beliefs excluded them from positions in the Anglican Church, from much professional life, and even from conventional schooling. Although never a student at Warrington Academy—known as "the Athens of the North," Warrington provided young Dissenters living in North West England the most enlightened and progressive education in the country—Johnson became one of the Lancashire school's most influential advocates. Joseph Priestley, a tutor at Warrington, became one of Johnson's closest friends; John Aikin and Thomas Malthus were among the many eminent Warrington pupils whose work he published and who were guests at his home.

Women writers were welcome at Johnson's table and were treated as equals. Susan Wolfson, the author of an admirably witty, informative, and succinct new guide to Wollstonecraft's most famous book, *A Vindication of*

the Rights of Woman (Johnson was her publisher and first champion), describes Johnson's dinners as "serial seminars" at a time when women had no access to universities.

Aikin's outspoken sister, the children's author Anna Laetitia Barbauld, mischievously recalled the dinners as having been "so truly social and lively, that we protracted them sometimes till...but I am not telling tales." A seven-year apprenticeship was mandatory in the mid-eighteenth century for anyone wanting to become a bookseller or publisher. (The two trades were inextricably entangled.) Released from his apprenticeship in 1761 at the age of twenty-two, Johnson quickly spread his net beyond the Baptist tracts he had been trained to publish. In 1764 he printed his first best seller, *An Authentic Narrative*, in which a Church of England minister, John Newton, juicily proclaimed the remorse for his early misdemeanors ("I loved sin, and was unwilling to forsake it") that overcame him as he underwent a spiritual conversion during his first and highly profitable career as a commander of slave ships. Ironically, in both this and a later work (whose shocking details about the treatment of the captives on his ships furnished invaluable ammunition to William Wilberforce's campaign for abolition), Newton was far less concerned about the cruelty of slavery, Hay comments, than about "its debasing spiritual effect on those who practiced it."

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Enriched and encouraged by the runaway success of Newton's memoir, Johnson set up shop in 1764 with a fellow bookseller at 8 Paternoster Row, close to St. Paul's Cathedral, in a warren of narrow streets that then comprised the heart of London's thriving book trade. Over the next six years he forged an enduring friendship with Priestley, the extraordinary founder of a new progressive system of education for Dissenters that looked far beyond the traditional classics-based curriculum offered at Oxford and Cambridge. In 1764, after befriendng Benjamin Franklin—who had just returned to defend American interests in London after a two-year stint in Philadelphia—Johnson facilitated communication between the brilliant pair. Priestley eagerly sought Franklin's views on his own 750-page treatise *History and Present State of Electricity*, which Johnson published in 1767.

But the encounter that had the most enduring effect on Johnson's life was with Fuseli, who in 1766 took rooms at Johnson's premises. Hay, after dismissing Claire Tomalin's racy conjecture in her biography *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1975) that the two men were lovers, characterizes their relationship as one of loyal and devoted friends. (Fuseli, together with his wife and most frequent model, Sophia Rawlins, was still around to act as Johnson's devoted caregiver at the end of his life in 1809.) Johnson's unmarried status need not, Hay suggests, point to his homosexuality; clear hints of a heterosexual life emerge in his fellow publisher John Murray's winking hope that Johnson had cured his "I-ch" after visiting a "bountifull Lady" at one of the Molly houses (brothels near the cathedral).

An unexplained fire broke out in 1770 and destroyed Johnson's Paternoster home, his shop, and all his stock. Also lost in the disastrous blaze were Fuseli's sketches for a series of stained-glass windows that he had been designing for Ely Cathedral. Distraught and broke, Fuseli went abroad for nine years to study art; Johnson, always calm in adversity, set about finding himself a new home.

Within six months the thirty-one-year-old publisher had established himself nearby at 72 St. Paul's Churchyard, a busy commercial street that was destroyed in 1940 during the London Blitz. It was here, in a lopsided little upstairs room that William Blake (employed as one of Johnson's regular engravers) often treated as a workshop, that the famous dinners began to take place. Following Fuseli's return to London in 1779, *The Nightmare*, his extraordinary painting of a recumbent and flimsily clad woman with a malevolent goblin perched upon her breast, became the room's dominant feature. What Blake thought while creating under the stare of such an incubus might have been any diner's guess.

Life in the publishing world had changed beyond all recognition during Fuseli's long absence in Europe. A decision in 1774 to ban the old English system of perpetual copyright caused a revolution in both bookselling methods and reading habits. By 1780 British publishers could legally reprint any uncopyrighted texts; as a result, books became cheaper, smaller, and accessible to a larger and less educated market. In 1782 Carl Moritz, a German visitor to England, was impressed to notice that his landlady, a tailor's widow, was reading Milton.

New technology opened up the market for engravings, briefly providing Fuseli with lucrative employment as a book illustrator for John Boydell's new Shakespeare Gallery, where his large paintings were exhibited alongside smaller engravings that were put on sale at an early version of a gallery gift shop. In August 1791, under Johnson's patronage, Fuseli began creating a series of thirty huge paintings intended, when reduced to book-sized engravings with the help of a gigantic roller device invented by Tom Paine, to illustrate a handsome edition of Milton to be supervised and annotated by the reclusive poet William Cowper, one of Johnson's most important discoveries. Sadly, threats of a rival project by John Boydell and the deteriorating health of Cowper's beloved companion, Mrs. Unwin, undermined Cowper's confidence in a project that he bitterly described as "that ill-fated work, impracticable itself, [which] has made everything else impracticable." In November 1792 Johnson compassionately suggested a postponement. His offer was accepted. Cowper's Milton was never completed. Fuseli forged ahead and opened his own Milton Gallery in 1799.

Hay, while excellent at describing the diversity of Johnson's growing business, has less to say about the day-to-day activity of a hardworking publisher in the years following the abolition of the laws that had limited book production and kept prices high. William St. Clair, conversely, reveals fascinating glimpses into papermaking in an industrial age. (The boiled and bleached paper used to fabricate pages that remain creamily white three hundred years later derived from an extraordinary range of garments, blending ladies' bonnets, shepherds' smocks, sailors' shirts, and—macabre thought—rags collected from battlefields.) Hay is more interested in the personalities of Johnson's authors than in either the means or the machinery (which remained surprisingly unaltered despite a rapidly growing market) by which their books were manufactured.

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Hay also suggests that Johnson, a dissenting Baptist who became a dissenting Unitarian, broke with convention in his support of the right of women writers to express unorthodox political opinions. One of the first to benefit from his enlightened approach was the boldly brilliant Anna Barbauld. When Priestley was first shown the unpublished "Corsica," her eloquent 1769 poem pleading for British intervention to save the new Corsican Republic from French control, he urged her to send it straight to Johnson. As Priestley had anticipated, his friend recognized in "Corsica" a powerful new voice, one that he resolved to nurture.

Although he didn't live to read Barbauld's groundbreaking fifty-volume (!) introduction to the British novelists (1810), Johnson sent his eight-year-old nephew (and eventual heir) Rowland Hunter to be schooled at Palgrave, the enlightened Suffolk academy at which Barbauld and her husband taught science, geography, and modern languages, alongside the more traditional subjects on offer at schools like Eton and Stowe. While generously supplying all the books that the couple required for their fortunate students—the Palgrave Academy forbade corporal punishment—Johnson also allowed Barbauld to control how her own educational works were printed. It no doubt helped that both the six-volume miscellany *Evenings at Home* (written by Barbauld and her brother John) and *Lessons for Children* proved immensely successful.

Despite Johnson's supportive attitude toward Barbauld as an educator of children, he was careful never to appear partisan. Barbauld, born into a family of forthright Dissenters, was eager to preach opposition to government in times of war. Sarah Trimmer, a popular and inexhaustibly prolific children's book writer implacably opposed to the Dissenters, hijacked Barbauld's conversational style to produce far more

conservative works that Johnson was equally willing to publish. He did not, however, invite the earnestly religious Mrs. Trimmer to his dinners.

Hay cites many women authors who benefited from Johnson's support. Mary Scott was a Unitarian poet who made a forceful and often witty argument for better female education in her long poem "The Female Advocate" (1774). Mary "Perdita" Robinson was serving a prison sentence for her husband's debts when Johnson published a harrowing poem by which she hoped to earn some desperately needed money. But only one among this formidable group of women writers shines out today.

Well documented though Wollstonecraft's connection to Johnson has been, Hay is the first to demonstrate the full extent of his devotion to the remarkable young woman to whom he was first introduced in 1786, when the Newington Green school, which Wollstonecraft had founded with her friend Fanny Blood, failed. John Hewlett, a friendly Anglican priest, sent Johnson her manuscript for *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, and Wollstonecraft went to the shop at St. Paul's Churchyard to meet him. Impressed by the book's conversational style and good sense, Johnson offered ten guineas for the copyright and invited Wollstonecraft to send more work. A correspondence was evidently initiated. When she returned in the late summer of 1787 from a dismal year as a governess in Ireland, she headed straight to Johnson's house. A resident niece may have added a veneer of respectability to his bold suggestion that the unmarried Wollstonecraft, a woman young enough to be his daughter, live there as his guest.

There's no doubt in Hay's account that Johnson recognized that he had met "the first of a new genus," a phrase used by Wollstonecraft in a letter to her sister in November 1787 that has become famous enough to serve as the subtitle to Johnson's new book. A fortnight after taking up residence in Johnson's home, Wollstonecraft wrote to inform one of her two younger sisters of her host's impressive pronouncement. Her hard-up siblings learned that Johnson had not only promised to publish her first novel (*Mary, A Fiction* had been written in Ireland) but also to provide her with a house and a servant, and to pay for both. "I wish to introduce you," Wollstonecraft confided to her sister Everina.

You would respect him; and his sensible conversation would soon wear away the impression, that of formality—or rather stiffness of manners, first makes to his disadvantage—I am sure you would love him did you know with what *tenderness* and humanity he has behaved to me.

Wollstonecraft had arrived at a timely moment. In 1788 Johnson and an enterprising young Scot, Thomas Christie, joined forces to found the *Analytical Review*, which reached out to Europe from what was becoming an introspective and increasingly conservative nation. "So *complete* a view of foreign literature has never yet been attempted in any Journal," Christie boasted, and with justice. Eager for independence, Wollstonecraft became one of Johnson's writing team, reviewing books on science, politics, travel, and even boxing, along with a multitude of novels, many of which she justly dismissed as worthless. A single complaint, made just before her marriage to William Godwin in 1797, that she was underpaid for her work as a reviewer should be set against Johnson's exceptional generosity not only to Wollstonecraft but to her family, a benevolent attitude that never diminished and ensured that she remained his devoted friend.

Wollstonecraft wrote her celebrated *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with Johnson's encouragement; the haste with which both books were written had much to do with the canny publisher's sense that the time was ripe for them. Naturally the *Analytical Review* applauded one of its own as a prophet, arguing that a policed and tyrannized island would be "better, wiser and happier" if Wollstonecraft's diagnosis of its ills in 1792—the anxious year in which *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appeared—was heeded.

Wollstonecraft and Godwin first met in November 1791 at one of Johnson's dinners, an occasion when Godwin, who had published almost nothing himself at that point, was far more interested in hearing the thoughts of Tom Paine than those of an annoyingly opinionated and loquacious female. Meeting a sadder, wiser woman in January 1796, Godwin changed his mind. We know that she bewitched him, but it's delightful of Hay to remind us of the playful way that Wollstonecraft scolded and cajoled her sober admirer, telling the renowned author of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) to help her out with her workload by reviewing a politically themed novel by Isaac D'Israeli: "There is a good boy write me a review of Vaurien."

Hay leaves her readers in no doubt that Johnson was among the most significant figures—perhaps the most significant—in Wollstonecraft's life as a writer. Through him (but most certainly not at his wish) she became close enough to Fuseli to seek even to join the artist's marriage. Her bold suggestion, which Fuseli later claimed was fiercely rejected by his wife Sophia in the autumn of 1792, was made a few months after Wollstonecraft, Johnson, and the Fuselis, alarmed by news of the French royal family's unexpected escape and recapture, canceled plans to visit Paris together in order to observe the progress of the revolution firsthand. In December, anxious to snap the painful chain of association to Fuseli, Wollstonecraft traveled alone to France, where she soon met Gilbert Imlay, a charming but fickle adventurer. In May 1794 the unmarried Wollstonecraft gave birth to Françoise or "Fanny," the fatherless little girl for whom Johnson later waived repayment of a £200 loan he'd made to the perennially indigent Godwin, only expressing his hope that the sum might instead be used to take care of Mary's child.

Did Johnson love Wollstonecraft? As much, readers might deduce from Hay's account, as he loved any woman. "I know her too well not to admire and love her," he wrote to a devastated Godwin when Wollstonecraft, nine days after giving birth to a second child, named Mary, in 1797, died of puerperal fever. "Your loss is insuperable." Interestingly, Johnson insisted that Fuseli should be invited to her funeral, which Godwin himself was too distressed to attend. "Next to ourselves," Johnson told the widower, "I believe no one had a juster sense of her worth or more laments her loss."

Wollstonecraft's premature death was followed by the most testing year of Johnson's life. A bright spot was the appearance of Coleridge, who offered the publisher-bookseller three of his finest poems: "Fears in Solitude," "Frost at Midnight," and "France: An Ode"—the last of which mused on France's postrevolutionary descent from freedom to tyranny. During the two weeks Johnson took to rush the poems into print as a pamphlet (while making the impoverished writer a gift of thirty pounds to help with his planned journey to Germany), Coleridge became a regular attendee at his dinners. Although the emotional young poet, on first meeting him, had found the diminutive publisher courteous but reticent, Coleridge reported to his wife that tears had stood in Johnson's eyes at their last meeting. "He is," he told Sara (a bit pompously but with evident sincerity), "a worthy man."

Johnson was brave to publish "France: An Ode" at a time when William Pitt's government, dreading a revolution in England of the kind that had led to regicide in France, was becoming increasingly repressive. The first signs of trouble for liberal thinkers had come eight years earlier in 1790, when 120 MPs voted down a repeal of the laws suppressing Dissenters. (In 1789 a mere twenty had objected.) Priestley, who had compared the spread of the Enlightenment to an ignited trail of gunpowder, irresistible in its speed and power, was nicknamed "Gunpowder Joe." Ominous threats dissuaded Johnson from publishing *Rights of Man*, Paine's fiery defense of republicanism against monarchy (although not from helping to spirit Paine out of town when he was being harried by government agents).

Throughout most of the 1790s Johnson's house served as a welcome refuge in which Dissenters could speak openly and without fear. In 1798, however, the new *Anti-Jacobin Review* nastily targeted the *Analytical Review*'s owner as "the serpent in Eden, spreading poison through his presses." Johnson was also singled out by

the unashamedly reactionary magazine as “this favourite publisher and friend of the PRIESTLEYS, the DARWINS, the GODWINS, and other *unprejudiced* authors.”

In February 1798 a government spy walked into two bookshops—one of them Johnson’s—and purchased a supposedly insurrectionist pamphlet by Gilbert Wakefield, which was widely available throughout the capital. Prosecutions swiftly followed. Within five days of the spy’s purchase, Johnson had removed all remaining copies of Wakefield’s pamphlet from his shop. It did him no good. Charged with sedition and found guilty by a rigged jury in July, he was sentenced in November to six months in prison. The chief reason for targeting him became apparent when the progovernment *Anti-Jacobin Review* rejoiced that the “object of our immediate attacks, the *Analytical Review*, has received its death-blow.” The final issue of Johnson’s admirable magazine, published in December 1798, carried a slightly bewildered review—it was far from being the only one—of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*.

Thanks to his stoical nature and the generosity of his devoted friends, Johnson didn’t suffer much in prison. Funds were raised to place him—expensively—in “a house of order and peace” where he was looked after by the prison coachman and his wife, who cooked the prisoner’s suppers. Conscious that the bookselling business was safe in the care of his nephew Rowland Hunter, Johnson worked as hard as ever while in jail and even mildly grumbled to a friend that he had “more visitors than are necessary.”

Outwardly Johnson remained calm. After he was released from King’s Bench, the Southwark prison where he had been confined, he continued to host dinners and to publish such dazzling new talents as the scientist and inventor Humphry Davy and—under pressure from Godwin—the essayist William Hazlitt. One old friend, Joel Barlow, remarked that Johnson had “grown fat & careless & happy”; the children’s author and novelist Maria Edgeworth, who shared her sister Charlotte’s deep affection for Johnson, noted with more perception that the publisher “is grown very cautious,” adding meaningfully, “A burnt child dreads the fire.”

When Johnson died in 1809, aged seventy-one, Godwin paid tribute to him in the *Morning Chronicle* as “a man of generous, candid, and liberal mind; he delighted in doing good.” Hay concurs. “Kindness is one word that runs through Johnson’s story,” she observes. Perhaps she needn’t have highlighted a weak connection to our own times by adding that kindness has its active counterpart in “care,” a word “which has taken on new significance in public conversation since the advent of Covid-19.”

Still, summarizing Johnson’s progressive achievements as a steadfast advocate of a broader, more liberal education for children and of the right of women to lead professional lives, Hay stresses the quality in him that she values most highly. Johnson’s kindness resonates like a crystal bell through her telling of his story. He was, she demonstrates, both a good man and a courageous one.

Miranda Seymour is the author of *I Used to Live Here Once: The Haunted Life of Jean Rhys* and the biography *Mary Shelley*, among other books. (November 2025)