



Defining the World: The Extraordinary Story of Dr Johnson's Dictionary

Henry Hitchings

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By the early eighteenth century, France and Italy had impressive lexicons, but there was no authoritative dictionary of English. Sensing the deficit, and impelled by a mixture of national pride and commercial expedience, the prodigious polymath Samuel Johnson embraced the task, turning over the garret of his London home to the creation of his own giant dictionary.

Johnson imagined that he could complete the job in three years. But the complexity of English meant that his estimate was wildly inadequate. Only after he had expended nearly a decade of his prime on the task did the dictionary finally appear - magisterial yet quirky, dogmatic but generous of spirit, and steeped in the richness of English literature. It would come to be seen as the most important British cultural monument of the eighteenth century, and its influence fanned out across Europe and throughout Britain's colonies - including, crucially, America.

Brilliantly entertaining and enlightening, *Defining the World* is the story of Johnson's heroic endeavor, 250 years after the first publication of the *Dictionary*. In alphabetically sequenced chapters, Henry Hitchings describes Johnson's adventure - his ambition and vision, his moments of despair, the mistakes he made along the way, and his ultimate triumph.

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