

## **The Life and Works of James Boswell (1740 – 1795)**

Prepared for the Calgary Burns Club by George Muir, 2013



*Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds*



Coat of arms of the last Laird of family Boswell.

Family Boswell is a Lowland Scottish family. As the Boswells are a family and a member of the aristocracy they do not have a chief. The family is represented by a Laird.

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## Family Origins

*'Every Scotchman,' said Sir Walter Scott 'has a pedigree. It is a national prerogative, as inalienable as his pride and his poverty'*

**James Boswell's pedigree** is impressive and dates back to the Battle of Hastings in 1066 in which Lord de Bosville is said to have been one on the Norman commanders. Robert de Bosville (Boseuille) was witness to many charters signed in the reign of William the Lion and the Boswells were among the knights who returned to Scotland with King David I (1124 - 53) after his stay at the English court. Roger de Boswell, 6<sup>th</sup> in descent from Robert de Bosville, lived in the reign of David II and acquired lands in Fife.

Sir John Boswell, descendant of Roger, who lived around the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century acquired the lands of Balmuto (north of Burntisland) in Fife. David Boswell of Balmuto, the 11<sup>th</sup> in succession to the lands of Balmuto had, besides his heir Alexander, who succeeded the estate, a son Thomas who became a servant of James IV. There is some uncertainty as to whether he was a *minstrel* to the king or *chief of the royal train*. Thomas married Annabella Campbell, daughter of Sir Hugh Campbell of Loudon who had held the barony of Auchinleck since at least the 13th century and possibly earlier. The castle, and the barony, remained within the Auchinleck family until 1504 when due to a failing Auchinleck male line, and the marriage of Annabella to Thomas Boswell, the estate and the title of *Laird* were granted to Boswell by King James IV. The Boswells assumed the title of laird from that day forward. Thomas was killed along with James IV and many of the Scottish nobility at the battle of Flodden in 1513. It is therefore unlikely that we will ever know which position Thomas really held at the court of James IV but he was the 1<sup>st</sup> Laird of Auchinleck of the Boswell family. The Laids of Auchinleck lineage is included as an Appendix to this paper.

The grandfather of our famous biographer **James Boswell** was also called James, and he was the 6<sup>th</sup> direct descendant of Thomas Boswell. He married Elizabeth Bruce, daughter of Alexander Bruce, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Kincardine and Countess Veronica van Aerssen, whose mother was Veronica, a daughter of the noble house of Sommelsdyk in Holland.

The father of our famous biographer was Alexander Boswell. He was an advocate at the Scottish bar and was elevated to the bench in 1754 at which time he took the title Lord Auchinleck. He married Euphemia Erskine, the great granddaughter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Kincardine. Her father was Lt. Col. John Erskine, grandson of John Erskine, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Mar. The house of Mar dates back to well before Robert the Bruce.

Our biographer **James Boswell** married his cousin **Margaret Montgomerie** also a great granddaughter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Kincardine. Although he only had the title of the 9<sup>th</sup> Laird of Auchinleck, James was extremely boastful of his ancestry – a “gentleman of ancient blood” as he described himself - but who could just as easily fit into the category so aptly described by Robert Burns -----

*“Ye see yon birkie, ca'd a lord,  
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that;”*

## Auchinleck House

Auchinleck is situated in Ayrshire, in Scotland's large Strathclyde region, 21 kilometers east of the town of Ayr.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the barony of Auchinleck was acquired by Thomas Boswell, who appears to have been in the immediate service of James IV. In 1505 he obtained charter of the lands of Cruikstoun, Over and Nether Keithstone, and Rogertoun, and about two years thereafter obtained another charter erecting the village and land of Keithstoun, in his barony of Auchinleck, into a 'burgh of barony'\*. Keithstoun is now incorporated in the town of Auchinleck. ... The name Auchinleck is a Celtic compound meaning "The Field of the Flat Stones", a very appropriate name, as the district abounds with freestone rock.

Auchinleck Old House was built in 1612 and was the home of the Boswell family prior to the building of the current Auchinleck House. The ruins are still standing within the estate.



The "new" Auchinleck House was built *circa* 1760 by Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck 8th Laird of Auchinleck. It later passed on to his son, James Boswell. Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson (see later section) visited the house in 1773 on their way back from their journey to the Hebrides. In 1782, James Boswell became the 9th Laird of Auchinleck. The design of the house has been attributed to Robert Adam, although it is now thought that it was designed by the Edinburgh-based square-wright John Johnston with a helping hand from Lord Auchinleck



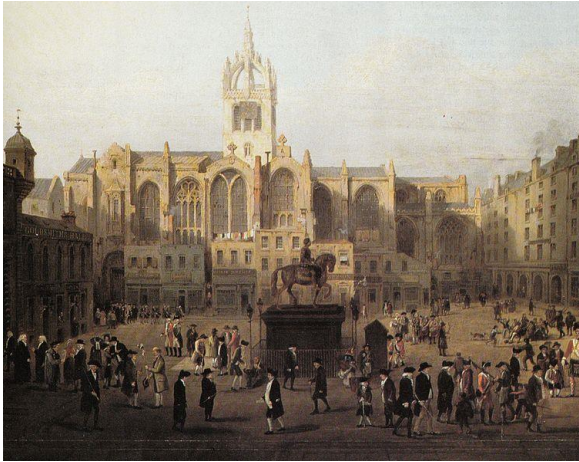
### **“Auchinleck House in the 20th century**

*During the Second World War, the then Laird of Auchinleck gave permission for Officers from the armies of Poland, Canada and France to live in Auchinleck House.*

*In 1986 the remains of the buildings were turned over to the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust by James Boswell, a descendent of the 18th-century Boswells. The Trust repaired the roof, and thus ensured the survival of the building. In 1999 Auchinleck House was bought by the Landmark Trust, a building preservation charity whose aim it is to "rescue historic and architecturally interesting buildings and their surroundings from neglect and, when restored, to give them new life by letting them for holidays." Now restored, Auchinleck House is used for holiday lets, and is occasionally open to the public.”*

*\* ‘Burghs of barony’ were distinct from royal burghs, as the title was granted to a landowner who, as a tenant-in-chief, held his estates directly from the crown. (In some cases, they might also be burghs of regality where the crown granted the leading noblemen judicial powers to try criminals for all offences except treason). They were created between 1450 and 1846, and conferred upon the landowner the right to hold weekly markets. Unlike royal burghs, they were not allowed to participate in foreign trade. In practice very few burghs of barony developed into market towns.*

## Early Life



*Parliament Close, Edinburgh.  
Birthplace of James Boswell*

**James Boswell** was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1740 in Blair's Land (the tall tenements were called "lands") on the east side of Parliament Close behind St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh.

(The Edinburgh Baptismal Register reports otherwise:— "Oct. 18, 1740; To Mr. Alexander Boswell younger of Auchinleck, advocate, and Mrs Eupham Erskine his spouse, a son named James, witnesses Walter M'Farlane of that Ilk, Allan Whitefoord, receiver general for North Britain, and Dr John Pringle, physician in Edinburgh.")

In these buildings the poor lived on the bottom and top floors and the more well-to-do in between. The Boswells lived on the fourth floor of such a building just off the Royal Mile near Parliament House. The location gave easy access to the courts for his father who was a lawyer and later a judge. This property no longer exists as, with many old buildings, it succumbed to fire. The family only lived there when the court was in session and in spring and summer they lived on the family estate at Auchinleck where James enjoyed riding with his father, planting trees and playing with the gardener's daughter to whom he was very much attracted.

At age five young James was sent to James Mundell's academy (for the wealthier children of the time) where he was instructed in English, Latin, writing and arithmetic. He was a delicate child and suffered from a nervous ailment (some thought hereditary) which would bother him sporadically throughout his lifetime. He was unhappy at school and began to suffer from nightmares and shyness.

Boswell did not offer any opinions on the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion although he grew up at the same time. Samuel Johnson is reported to have remarked "Boswell in the year 1745 was a fine boy, wore a white cockade, and prayed for King James, till one of his uncles (General Cochran) gave him a shilling on condition that he would pray for King George, which he accordingly did. So you see that Whigs of all ages are made the same way."

When he was eight years old he was taken out of Mundell's academy and educated by a string of private tutors at home, where he was introduced to religion and literature – in particular the *Spectator* essays.

In 1753 at the age of thirteen he was enrolled into the Arts course at Edinburgh University. It was whilst at university in 1756 he suffered a nervous breakdown and was sent to recuperate to the border village of Moffat. For a long period after he had recovered his health he was so afraid of ghosts that he could not sleep alone. He did not settle back into a student's life following his illness. At eighteen years of age much to the dismay of his father he developed a great love for the theatre and fell for an actress some ten years his senior. This was the last straw as far his father was concerned and he banished him to the University of Glasgow where he attended the lectures of Adam Smith. Still under the influence of his catholic mistress he decided to convert to Catholicism. In Presbyterian Scotland and with a Calvinistic father this was paramount to political suicide for his future. When his father learned of this he ordered him home but Boswell did not obey this order and ran away to London where he led a lifestyle of low moral values at which time he contracted gonorrhea which was to plague him the rest of his life.

In London he befriended Alexander, 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Eglintoune. The Earl, also an Ayrshire man, having the large estate at Kilwinning, was well acquainted with the Boswell family and insisted that Boswell have an apartment in his house and introduced him to, in Boswell's words "into the circle of the great, the gay, and the ingenious." Eglintoune took him to Newmarket, which adventure in the presence of the aristocracy made such an impression on the young Boswell that he described it in the poem "*The Cub at Newmarket*". It was written in the coffee shop there. As in many of his works he includes himself in this poem; in this case he is the "cub"

"Lord Eglintoune, who has, you know,  
A little dash of whim or so;  
Who thro' a thousand scenes will range  
To pick up anything that's strange,  
By chance a curious cub had got,  
On SCOTIA's mountains newly caught."

(This poem he dedicated to His Royal Highness Edward Duke of York, but it was not published until 1762 when he read the manuscript to him received his permission to go ahead and have it published. The price at the time of publication was one shilling.)

After three months of this life he was brought back by his father from London and re-enrolled at Edinburgh University in the faculty of law. His father did not approve of his son's lifestyle and so James was forced by his father to sign away most of his inheritance in exchange for an annual allowance of £100.

## **1760 -- 1769**

He studied law from 1760 until 1762 at which time he intimated to his father that he was eager to enter the foot guards. Lord Auchinleck agreed that if he were to pass his exams in civil law he would receive a supplementary annuity and would be free to go to London to seek his commission in the foot guards. He passed the law exam in July of 1762. Boswell set off for London in November of that year

and soon after his arrival he was informed of the birth, in Scotland, of his son Charles for whom he arranged an Anglican baptism. The child's mother was a girl called Peggy Doig who was probably a servant.

Boswell was in his element; meeting Oliver Goldsmith, the novelist and John Wilkes the radical politician and polemicist. His greatest thrill was the meeting with Samuel Johnson in the spring of 1763 (see later section). By this time Boswell realised that his plan to join the foot guards was not a practicable proposition, so he gave in to his father and agreed that he should become a lawyer. His father agreed with his decision to spend the winter studying civil law at the University of Utrecht and then embark on a European tour. In fact he spent a year in Utrecht where he met and fell in love with a vivacious young Dutch woman, Isabelle de Charrière, both his social and intellectual superior. He also became an ardent admirer of the young widow Geelvinck who turned down his proposal of marriage. He was deeply affected by Johnson's piety and so on Christmas Day 1763 he received communion for the first time in the ambassador's chapel in The Hague. He became quite involved in his new found pious program but the novelty soon wore off. He received word that his illegitimate son Charles had died and he went into a period of deep depression and had recurring nightmares of being hanged. At this time he found that overindulging in physical pleasures resulted in more happiness than chastity and hard work and soon he lapsed into his old life of promiscuity.

For the next two years Boswell spent his time travelling around Europe during which time he passed through Switzerland and met Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire. He spent nine months in Italy and during a visit to Naples he became close to John Wilkes who had by then been outlawed from Britain because of his radical views. In the autumn of 1765 he arrived in Corsica to interview the heroic Corsican chieftain Pasquale de Paoli who was establishing his county's independence from Genoa. Paoli and Boswell became lifelong friends and when he returned to the mainland he sent off articles to the newspapers mingling the factual with political embellishments; during his sojourn in Europe he had kept a detailed journal of his exploits and his meetings with prominent people.

He returned to London in February 1766 during which trip he allegedly had an affair with Rousseau's mistress. He left London for Scotland for a few weeks in order to sit his final law exam which he passed, and was admitted to the bar in July of that year. For the next 17 years he practiced law in Edinburgh. He was a very able courtroom lawyer but criminal law was not a very lucrative profession.

In 1768 France invaded Corsica. In the same year Boswell, who was a major supporter of Corsica published "*An Account of Corsica, The Journal of a Tour to That Island*" and "*Memoirs of Pascal Paoli*". People wanted to know about Corsica and Boswell encouraged this by raising public support for the cause. He sent arms and money to the Corsican fighters but they were eventually defeated in 1769. The first edition sold out in six weeks, the second (also 3500 copies) in a year but after the third edition in 1769 Samuel Johnson wrote to Boswell saying "Your History is like other histories, but your Journal is in a very high degree curious and delightful . . . Your History was copied from books; your Journal rose out of your own experience and observation." As a result of these comments the book was neglected for almost two centuries. It should be said that this was really the best work by Boswell until his "Life of Samuel Johnson". His other publications would probably have gone un-noticed over time had it not have been for these two works which drew attention to him.

During the years 1766 and 1769 Boswell carried on a relationship with a young Mrs. Dodds with whom he had a daughter, Sally, who like young Charles died in infancy. At the same time he amused himself with various schemes of marriage. Eventually in November 1769 he married his cousin



Margaret Montgomerie, daughter of his father's sister, Veronica and David Montgomerie of Lainshaw. Margaret was an eligible match being related to the noble family of Eglintoun and her father's claim to the dormant peerage of Lyle. She was aware of Boswell's philandering but agreed to marry him for better for worse.

## 1770 – 1795

For the first few years of his marriage he lived a quiet hardworking professional life. He was faithful to his wife and was confident about getting a seat in Parliament and a good position in the government or maybe even a Scots judgeship like his father. He paid short annual visits to London where he met Samuel Johnson (See later section) and in 1771 his old friend Pascal Paoli paid him a visit. Life could be described as pretty routine for Boswell until he and Johnson went off on their famous tour of the Highlands and the Hebrides in 1773.

The accounts of his European travels and his "*Account of Corsica*" met with relative literary success economically but he was only moderately successful as an advocate and by the late 1770s he was suffering from severe depression and became addicted to gambling and alcoholism.

He and Margaret had four sons and two daughters; two sons died in infancy but the remaining children loved him dearly despite his faults. When his mood became happier his life was vice free and his good nature earned him many lifelong friends. Boswell published anonymously in *The London Magazine* between 1777 and 1783 a series of essays entitled "*The Hypochondriack*" which as the name suggests are written to express the feelings of someone suffering from this disposition and covered subjects related to drinking, unhappy childhoods, unstable personality and death but to mention a few. The essays bore titles such as "*On Subordination in Government*"(1779), "*On Living in the Country*"(1780), "*On Parents and Children*"(1781), "*On Change*"(1783). In this latter essay he wrote "Nothing is more disagreeable than for a man to find himself unstable and changeable. An Hypochondriack is very liable to this uneasy imperfection, in so much that there sometimes remains only a mere consciousness of identity".

At the end of 1783 he published a pamphlet attacking Charles James Fox's East India Bill hoping that it would attract the attention of William Pitt. Pitt sent him a note of thanks but no invitation to engage him. Boswell's political aspirations were a search for stability and his "consciousness of identity", but his hoped for political career failed and this contributed to his 'political hypochondria.

His father had died in 1782 and he inherited the title Laird of Auchinleck. He managed the estate well although he did not live there. He still missed London and thinking that he could do better at the English Bar he set about preparing himself for that goal.

Boswell was very upset upon the death of his friend Samuel Johnson on December 13 1784 and decided to proceed slowly in writing the *Life of Johnson* and to publish the journal of the tour to the Hebrides as a first installment. It was published in 1785 and was a best seller although it provoked a lot of criticism for the amount of time spent on "himself".

He was called to the English Bar from the Inner Temple in 1786 and moved there with his family. He was no more successful in the English legal circle than he had been in Scotland and had virtually no legal practice. His main activity was now in writing the *“Life of Samuel Johnson”*. He was not considered a literary heavyweight but his *“Life of Samuel Johnson”* did earn him the reputation of one of the greatest biographers, not only of his time, but since, due to the style in which it was written.

Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) was an Irish statesman, author, orator, political theorist and philosopher, who, after moving to England, served for many years in the House of Commons of Great Britain as a member of the Whig party. He was a member of “The Club” founded by Samuel Johnson to which Boswell was invited to join (see later section). As such he was very familiar with Boswell’s interest in politics and aspirations. He told Boswell that “We must do something for you” However he was unsuccessful, but his efforts aroused the interest of Sir James Lowther (1736 – 1802) 5<sup>th</sup> Baronet of Lowther (Westmorland) and one of the most powerful men in British politics, who used his influence to appoint Boswell to the post of Recorder of Carlisle in 1788. Boswell wrote the following poem caled “Words to be set for a Recorder”

“Boswell once flamed with patriot zeal,  
His bow was never bent;  
Now he no public wrongs can feel  
Till Lowther nods assent.”

Soon after his appointment his fellow countryman Dr. John Douglas was made Bishop of Carlisle. This was welcomed by Boswell who then penned a happier ditty.

“Of old, ere wise concord united this isle,  
Our neighbours of Scotland were foes at Carlisle;  
But now what a change have we here on the Border,  
When Douglas is Bishop and Boswell Recorder!”

Boswell only held this position for two years as he felt that lining in London presented too many inconveniences to the position of circuit judge.

Boswell was always intent on getting involved in political issues of the day. He attended a meeting of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in May of 1787 which had been set up to persuade William Wilberforce, MP for Bramber, Yorkshire, to lead the abolition movement in Parliament. According to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson Boswell was initially a keen supporter of the cause but by 1788 he had become opposed to it. This fits more with Boswell’s aristocratic arrogance as can be seen in a discussion that he had with Samuel Johnson as far back as 1773 in which he showed his enthusiasm for feudalism. He remarked that he - “believed mankind were happier in the ancient feudal state of subordination than when in the modern state of independency”. Johnson merely responded “To be sure the Chief was”.

In 1791, well after Johnson’s death, he wrote and published his poem *“No Abolition of Slavery or the Universal Empire of Love”* which he dedicated to the “Respectable Body of West-India Planters and Merchants”. An extract from this poem is given below which shows his “let them eat cake” attitude.

“Lo then, in yonder fragrant isle  
Where Nature ever seems to smile,  
The cheerful *gang!*—the negroes see  
Perform the task of industry:  
Ev’n at their labour hear them sing,  
While time flies quick on downy wing;  
Finish’d the bus’ness of the day,  
No human beings are more gay:  
Of food, clothes, cleanly lodging sure,  
Each has his property secure;  
Their wives and children are protected,  
In sickness they are not neglected;  
And when old age brings a release,  
Their grateful days they end in peace.”

His wife longed to be in Auchinleck and this longing grew as she became more and more sick. She returned to Auchinleck but Boswell continued to stay in London. She died on June 4, 1789 when he was returning to London after a visit to Auchinleck. He continued to strive with “The Life” and it was eventually published in two volumes on May 16, 1791. It met with success and personal criticism. He enjoyed the literary fame but considered himself to be a failure. A second edition was published in July of 1793 and he was working on a third when he died in his London home on May 19, 1795.

## **Boswell and Johnson**

Boswell in his “Life of Johnson” wrote -

*‘This is to me a memorable year; for in it I had the happiness to obtain the acquaintance of that extraordinary man whose memoirs I am now writing; an acquaintance which I shall ever esteem as one of the most fortunate circumstances of my life.’*

In 1758 Lord Hailes (Sir David Dalrymple, Scottish advocate and judge) had mentioned the name of Samuel Johnson to Boswell and in 1760, during his first visit to London his friend Samuel Derrick had promised to introduce him to Johnson. Thomas Sheridan in Edinburgh, whilst giving him elocution lessons had made a similar promise. When he returned from Europe to London towards the end of 1762 he discovered that Sheridan had quarreled with Johnson and Derrick had retired to Bath and so neither of the promises was kept. Fortunately his friend Samuel Derrick (who introduced him to the seedier side of London society) had introduced Boswell to a Mr. Davies, a bookseller in Covent Garden, whose impersonations of Johnson’s voice and mannerisms were well known. It was in Mr. Davies’ back parlour on May 16<sup>th</sup> 1763 when they were having tea that they were interrupted by Johnson coming into the shop. Mr. Davies introduced the young Boswell to the fifty four year old Johnson and so began a friendship which was to last twenty one years. During this time they only spent a little over a year together with the longest single period being the time in the Highlands and Hebrides.

Johnson was a very forthright man and could in fact be quite rude. As you will read in a later section his introduction to Boswell was not conducted in a very polite manner, but despite this the two became

very close friends. It seems that Boswell saw Johnson as a father figure, not because he was some thirty two years older but because he understood Boswell and his interest in literature and the social side of life; something Boswell's father could not appreciate.

On August 5<sup>th</sup> 1763 Boswell set off for Harwich to take a boat to Holland enroute to Utrecht University. Johnson who by this time had taken a real interest in Boswell's life went with him to Harwich to see him "out of England" with thoughts of perhaps himself following later to make a tour of Holland. He never did.

Boswell did not return from Europe until February 1766 and Johnson received him with kindness and friendship as he passed through London on his way to Scotland where his mother had just recently died.

Over the next seven years the two friends only met on the few short occasional visits that Boswell made to London. Around the spring of 1763, Johnson formed "The Club", a social group that included his friends Reynolds, Burke, Garrick, Goldsmith and others. They decided to meet every Monday at 7:00 pm at the Turk's Head in Gerrard Street, Soho, and these meetings continued until long after the deaths of the original members. During one of his visits to London in the summer of 1773 Boswell was invited to join the Club having been proposed by Johnson. The members of this Club eventually included Adam Smith (one of Boswell's professors at Glasgow University).

In the autumn of 1773 Johnson came to Edinburgh and stayed with the Boswells prior to the famous tour of the Highlands and Hebrides. Margaret Boswell was not impressed by Johnson; she considered him a bit of a boor and felt that he had too much influence over her husband's life. This went unheeded by Boswell who considered Johnson a "Guide, Philosopher, and Friend".



They set off on their tour on August 18, 1773, moving up the east coast through St. Andrews, Aberdeen and on to Inverness.

From there they went down along Loch Ness and then west through Glen Moriston, Glen Sheil and Glenelg enroute to the Isle of Skye. They spent a considerable time in Skye prior to taking a small boat across to Raasay where they spent about four days. On their return to Skye they proceeded to Kinsburgh and met with Miss Flora MacDonald whom they quizzed about Charles Stuart. They also showed quite a bit of interest in Fingal and Ossian. It was never confirmed by any of the locals that Ossian had composed the poems. They were treated to a number of recitations in the original.

They left Skye for the Isle of Coll and then on to Mull. From Mull they visited Eig and Staffa. They finally returned to the mainland on October 22, 1773 having spent some more time

on Mull. From Oban they journeyed across the Rannoch moor, down Loch Lomond to Dumbarton and on to Glasgow. They set out for Ayrshire on October 30<sup>th</sup> arriving at Auchinleck House on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. Boswell revelled in showing Johnson around the estate and telling the family history. Boswell's father, Lord Auchinleck, did not hold Johnson in very high esteem and Boswell had asked his friend to avoid three topics in which they differed widely – Whiggism, Presbyterianism and Sir John Pringle (a Scottish physician who has been called the "father of military medicine" and Physician to His Majesty King George III). However, despite Johnson's promise not to talk on these subjects, on November 6<sup>th</sup> while Lord Auchinleck was showing Johnson his library the topics did arise and quite the altercation developed. There is no mention as to who won the argument but Lord Auchinleck was later very civil towards Johnson. November 8<sup>th</sup> saw the pair of travelers set off for Edinburgh where they arrived some three days later. Johnson finally left Edinburgh on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. This tour was the longest time that the two men had ever spent together. They did meet again spasmodically over the next twelve years until Johnson's death in 1784 (he had suffered Tourette's syndrome for most of his life). It is interesting to note that in all of the seventeen years that the two were friends they only spent time together for one hundred and eighty days in addition to the 90 days on their highlands and islands tour.

Boswell had collected a mass of information on his friend Johnson and had recorded it in surprising detail in his journals. Boswell was extremely upset by Johnson's death and vowed to write "*The Life of Samuel Johnson*". This took him many years and was finally published in 1791. It contains records of their discussions, quotations and expressions used by Johnson and many of his letters from all of which the reader gains an excellent insight into the character of a great man. A second edition was the last literary work of James Boswell and published just before his death. "*The Life*" as it is often referred to, is probably the greatest biographical work ever produced.

## **Boswell and Robert Burns**

James Boswell was nineteen years old when Robert Burns was born. He was a final year undergrad at the University of Edinburgh and an ardent admirer of the young actresses in the city – something that Burns was to be some twenty seven years later. Although born into families at the opposite ends of the social spectrum, it is worthy of note that there are distinct parallels in the character of both Lord Auchinleck, Boswell's father, and William Burnes, father of the poet; both were stern Presbyterian moralists who had serious concerns over the attractions of the flesh for their elder sons.

In 1766 the Burns family moved from Alloway to the farm of Mount Oliphant. In this same year Boswell was already into his third year of his friendship with Dr. Johnson and returned to Edinburgh after his tour of Europe and Corsica. He submitted his Latin legal thesis to the Faculty of Advocates with whom he was to practice law for twenty years at the Court of Session in Edinburgh. Robert was only seven years old and he and his brother Gilbert were under the tutelage of John Murdoch in Alloway.

When the Burns family moved from Mount Oliphant to the farm of Lochlie in 1777, Boswell was in Edinburgh mourning the death of his son David and living for that summer in a house in the park of The Meadows south of the old town.

When Burns' father died in 1784, Robert with his brother Gilbert and their sisters moved to the farm of Mossgiel near Mauchline. It was here that Burns' literary career really began. At this time Boswell had been Laird of Auchinleck for two years following the death of his own father and now Burns and Boswell were neighbours living only about four miles apart. This year also saw Boswell supporting James Hunter Blair in his successful bid to be Lord Provost of Edinburgh. Two years later Hunter Blair (now Sir James Hunter Blair) together with the Earl of Glencairn and several Ayrshire gentry were responsible for the introduction of Burns to Edinburgh's high society when he came there to prepare his second edition of his poems. He took lodgings in the Lawnmarket about half a mile from the house vacated by the Boswell family some eight months earlier when they moved from Edinburgh to London; and so no possibility of meeting.

One of the most remarkable associations between Burns and Boswell was their strong attraction to the same woman. One day in 1786 when Burns was walking in the woods of Ballochmyle he spied Wilhelmina Alexander, the younger sister of Claude Alexander, a high ranking person in the East India Company, who had just bought the Ballochmyle Estate. Burns sent her a letter on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November enclosing his song "*The Lass o' Ballochmyle*" but apparently either on the advice, or order from her brother, she did not reply. Some ten days later Burns left for Edinburgh and asked Wilhelmina for her permission to include the song in his Edinburgh edition. The permission was not granted. Claude Alexander could not accept Burns' clasping his sister to his bosom especially as he was aware of another more acceptable admirer of his sister; namely, the local Laird of Auchinleck, James Boswell. He had seen her driving in her chaise and was immediately smitten by her beauty, so much so that he kept a sub-journal in which he recorded his twenty meetings with her (which ended in 1791). Their relationship was purely platonic, which is contrary to Boswell's reputation and considering the fact that he had been a widower for some years. Wilhelmina was to die, unmarried, in 1843 at the age of ninety and according to unsubstantiated local Ayrshire reports, Burns letter and song were found on her person.

In 1788 Burns moved with his family to Ellisland in Dumfriesshire but he visited Ayrshire frequently during his time as an excise man. Boswell was an infrequent visitor to Auchinleck, preferring the life in London to the country life in Ayrshire.

Boswell was a snob and never more so than when it came to poetry. He seems to have been of the opinion that poetry and prose were the duty of the gentry and not that of a common ploughman. It is also possible that he had a fear that Burns' wit would have made him look foolish and as such made no attempt to make any contact with Burns. Boswell's poetry "is quite simply appalling" according to David W. Purdie " - it is indeed a harbinger of the Poet & Tragedian of Dundee, William McGonagall himself." As an example here is his poem in praise of the Edinburgh Defensive Band --

*"Colonel CROSBIE takes the field  
To France and Spain, he will not yield,  
But still maintains his high command  
At the head of the noble DEFENSIVE BAND  
Hark! What a glorious volley  
At the word of command of Major Jolly!  
On Heriot's Green  
Now with wonder are seen,  
The bravest Warriors in all the land!"*

Compare this to the *Dumfries Volunteers* by Burns.

*“Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?  
Then let the louns beware, Sir;  
There's wooden walls upon our seas,  
And volunteers on shore, Sir:  
The Nith shall run to Corsincon,  
And Criffel sink in Solway,  
Ere we permit a Foreign Foe  
On British ground to rally!  
We'll ne'er permit a Foreign Foe  
On British ground to rally!”*

Which poet does more to encourage a strong nationalist spirit?

Burns mentions Boswell only twice in his works. The first mention is his poem “*Fête Champêtre*” (1788) in which he reviews three potential candidates for the Ayrshire seat in the 1788 parliamentary elections. In this Boswell is referred to as –

*“ – him wha led o’er Scotland a’  
The meikle URSA MAJOR?”*

(This refers of course to Boswell’s tour of the Highlands and Hebrides with Samuel Johnson who was often described as a great bear of a man, hence the term URSA MAJOR.)

Burns' second mention of the Boswell appears in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons," a protest against an Act of 1786 which removed certain tax advantages from Scotland's distillers. In the tenth stanza we find:

*“But could I like Montgomeries fight  
Or gab like Boswell”*

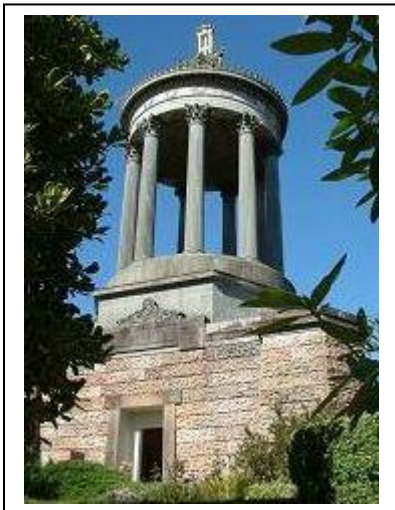
The only reference to Burns in Boswell’s papers is an annotation in Boswell’s handwriting on a letter from Burns to Bruce Campbell of Millrig, Boswell’s second cousin and agent. The letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> November 1788 expresses a strong desire on Burns’ part to meet Boswell. Enclosed with the letter was the Ballad “*Fête Champêtre*”. Campbell was a great supporter of the Kilmarnock Edition and a good friend of Burns. The letter was written in Burns’ best Augustan English style and although addressed to Campbell it was meant to be read by Boswell who disliked the Scots vernacular both in speech and prose. The letter was written to appeal to Boswell’s sense of social superiority over a tenant farmer and was careful to disclaim any patronage from Boswell. It would appear that Boswell did read the letter and in his usual arrogant egotistical manner annotated it “*Mr. Robert Burns the Poet expressing very high sentiments of me.*” Burns was never invited to Auchinleck House or to any meeting with Boswell who was obviously flattered by the desire for a meeting by a fellow man of letters.

The reasons for Boswell's avoidance of Burns were probably their relative social positions and their political views. The Mossgiel farm of which Burns was the tenant farmer was 160 acres, the estate of Auchinleck of which Boswell was owner and laird was 16000 acres. Burns was no stranger to members of society and their tables. His friends were also friends and peers of Boswell. This would seem to suggest that it was Boswell's privileged upbringing and perhaps to some extent his desire to distance himself from the Scottish traits and language that made him determined to avoid any meeting with Burns.

Politics did however play an important role in Boswell's reason to distance himself from Burns. Burns was well-known across the land as a radical Whig. His support of the French revolution in his poems and letters left no doubt in the minds of the authorities as to his political leanings. This support was for the original egalitarian principles of the revolution but in time he was very much against the murders and assassinations that took place. He was also very much opposed to the French military invasions of European countries and in particular their threats to invade the British Isles.

Boswell on the other hand was a high Tory and more than likely would have considered Burns subversive. His comment on the French revolution was that it was "Diablacy". He was in many ways quite nervous about the goings-on in France as all of his tenants were the "lower class" and were being influenced to some extent by the egalitarian principles of the revolution exacerbated no doubt by the poetical works of his fellow Scot who was a nearby tenant farmer.. It is not outside the realm of probability that Henry Dundas, Scottish advocate and Tory politician (Minister for War on the outbreak of the Wars of the French Revolution and Pitt's closest advisor) quietly discouraged Boswell from providing any form of support to Burns.

The differences between these two men, who never met, continued until their dying days about one year apart.



Whatever the reasons for the distance between the two men, the differences were reversed by the next generation. James Boswell's son and heir, Sir Alexander Boswell, Bart., was a true admirer of Burns and saw in him all that his father had missed or ignored. He convened a meeting in Ayr with the objective of forming a committee for the erection of a suitable monument at his Alloway's birthplace. The meeting only attracted one other person, the Rev. Hamilton Paul. They were determined to move ahead with raising funds and were so successful that in 1819 Alexander Boswell laid the foundation stone. In 1821 Sir Alexander Boswell and Robert Burns Jr. stood side by side in the platform party of dignitaries for the inauguration of Alloway Burns Monument. It stands to this day above the River Doon and within sight of Burns' cottage. It has nine pillars representing the nine Muses. And so James Boswell's son Alexander redressed the indifference of his father towards Scotland's national bard.



## Boswell and Freemasonry

The Boswell family has a long history of freemasonry. It begins on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1600 at a meeting of the Lodge of Edinburgh held at Holyrood where a James Boswell's mark and signature constitute the earliest authentic record of a non-operative mason. His actual status has never been determined.

The next records are of Alexander Boswell Laird of Auchinleck, Senator of the College of Justice and Lord of Judiciary in 1756 and member of the Lodge of Edinburgh. His brother John Boswell, who was President of the Royal College of Physicians, was Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, 1753-54.

**James Boswell**, our author, was admitted a Freemason in the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge in Edinburgh on August 14, 1759, probably on a recommendation from his uncle John Boswell. Later on he became the Master of Canongate Kilwinning Lodge for two terms and made an Honorary member of Edinburgh Lodge in February 1777. He was Depute Grand Master of Scotland for the period 1776-1778 but declined nomination for Grand Master.

James's son, Sir Alexander Boswell 1775-1822, a renowned Scottish songwriter and printer, composed many Masonic songs including "The Mother Lodge, Kilwinning." He was elected Master Mother Kilwinning Lodge on December 21, 1820 and became Provincial Grand Master for Ayrshire.

It is interesting to note that in February 1787, Robert Burns was made the Poet Laureate of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning No. 2, Edinburgh. This event was recorded in the minute book, which states:

*"The Right Worshipful Master, having observed that Brother Burns was present in the Lodge, who is well known as a great poetic writer, and for a late publication of his works, which have been universally commended, submitted that he should be assumed a [honorary] member of this lodge, which was unanimously agreed to, and he was assumed accordingly "*



The masonic tradition has it the Burns was installed as Poet Laureate at the March meeting of the Lodge (as many paintings show), but Lodge records disprove this, although some maintain that faulty records and Robert's modesty are responsible for it being left out of the Lodge minutes and Robert's letters.

It seems unusual that given the obvious admiration that the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge had for Robert Burns, and Boswell's close association with this lodge that, he, Boswell made no attempt to meet with Burns or even offer him any recognition. It should be noted however that Boswell was

residing in London in 1787 and may not have been in close touch with his Lodge. He was of course aware of Burns' works and as a fellow Scot, indeed a fellow Ayrshireman, and as a brother mason it only seems reasonable that he would have made some effort to correspond with him.

## **Boswell and Scotland**

James Boswell was undoubtedly a Scot but he had very much a love/hate attitude towards his origins and identity. He loved to boast of his lineage but for no other reason than to ensure that people were aware that he was not a "common" Scot but one who was eligible to mix with the aristocracy and those in the higher echelons of society. Many Scots had what has been called a divided or concentric loyalty; Burns wrote both anti-Union songs and also defended the Union, Walter Scott had a passion for the Scottish past and a commitment to the British or United progress. Boswell was not proud to be a Scot.

In his *"Account of Corsica"* Boswell quotes from the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) – "For it is not glory, it is not honour, but it is liberty alone that we fight and contend for, which no honest man will lose but with his life." He was sympathetic to the Corsican struggle for independence but never showed any support for a Scottish independence yet he used the Declaration of Arbroath to portray the feelings of the Corsicans in their struggle. He saw the Corsican struggle as akin to the Scottish wars of independence against Edward I and II, not in any way related to the situation in Scotland in his lifetime as he was happy to live in the social circle in London and also to be the laird of Auchinleck in what was still very much a feudal system.

When Boswell met Samuel Johnson for the first time he was introduced as a young gentleman from Scotland. He was aware of Johnson's feelings regarding the Scots and so in an attempt to ingratiate himself with Johnson Boswell remarked "Mr. Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it." To which Johnson replied "That Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help." Boswell was offended but made no comment and soon recovered from this disparaging remark to become a life-long friend of the famous English writer.

The only time that Boswell showed any dislike of the English was when he saw two highland officers being verbally abused by a theatre audience. He describes the scene in his December 8<sup>th</sup> 1762 journal.

*"I jumped up on the benches, roared out, 'Damn you, you rascals!' hissed and was in the greatest rage. I hated the English; I wished from my soul that the Union was broke and that we might give them another Bannockburn"*

In the 1760's Boswell decided that the Scots language was becoming less used and he embarked upon the creation of a Scots dictionary. This is another contradiction in his feelings towards his native land as he had tried to rid himself of his Scottish accent by taking diction classes from Thomas Sheridan, the father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (playwright – *School for Scandal*). Boswell's father, Sir Alexander Boswell, the renowned Edinburgh advocate and laird of Auchinleck spoke the Scots dialect, much to the disapproval of Boswell.

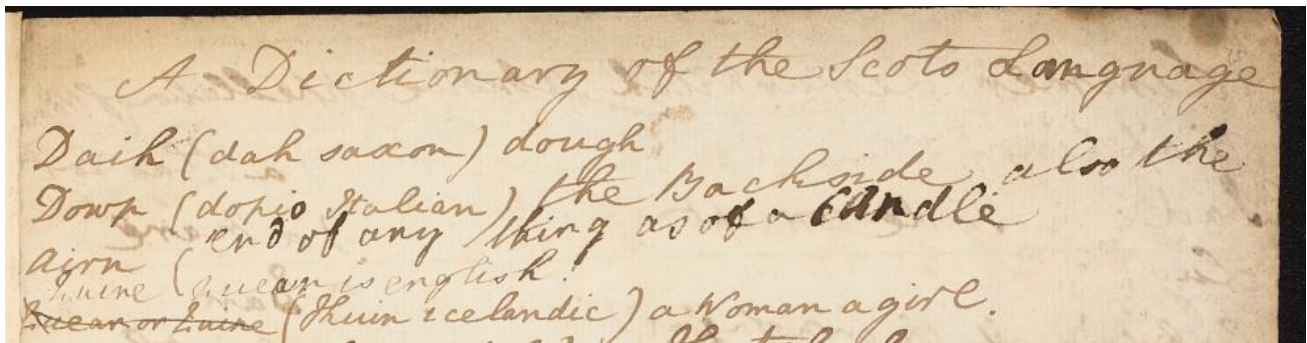


Boswell at the time of his decision to compile the Scots dictionary

Two references to his decision to create the dictionary can be found in his publication “*Boswell in Holland*”. In October 1769 he showed a ‘specimen’ of his intended dictionary to Johnson who told him that by collecting his own country’s words “you will do a useful thing towards the history of language”

*‘We have not a single Scots dictionary. Really, that is amazing. I believe there is not another language in Europe ... of which there is not some sort of lexicon.’*

*‘The Scottish language is being lost every day, and in a short time will become quite unintelligible. [...] To me, who have the true patriotic soul of an old Scotsman, which would seem a pity. It is for that reason that I have undertaken to make a dictionary of our tongue, through which one will always have the means of learning it like any other dead language.’ (Boswell in Holland, p. 161)*



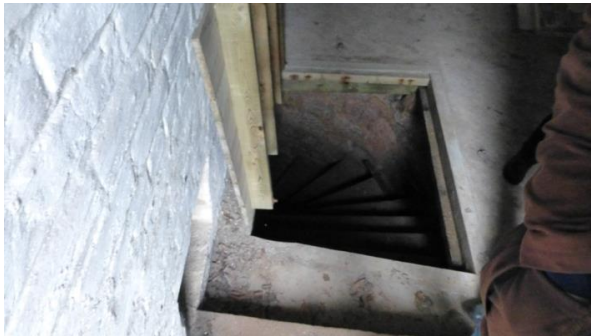
*My dictionary will be merely the task of my leisure hours. Since I wish very much to do a thorough piece of work, I shall not hurry. I shall go quietly on, with all the help I can get, and I hope that in time you will see it done satisfactorily.*  
(Boswell in Holland, p. 163)

Boswell had planned to engage some other contributors and had advertised in the Scottish press for some material. He continued to work on his project during his time in Europe but abandoned it soon

after returning to England. The manuscript was lost for many years until it was discovered in the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 2011 by Susan Rennie, a freelance lexicographer.

In 1794 he stood as a Tory parliamentary candidate for Ayrshire. He had done some preparatory work for this in the previous year when he published a *“Letter to the People of Scotland; on the Present State of the Nation”*. He lost his bid to be an MP but in 1795 he wrote a second *“Letter to the People of Scotland”* in which he attacked the new government by defending the constitutional rights of Scotland to retain their fifteen legal Lords of Session, as established by the Union. He was very much against any form of change to the laws or constitutional principles. His protests prevailed and the laws were not changed for another generation, long after Boswell’s death.

He became laird of Auchinleck on the death of his father in 1782. It was his wife Margaret who kept him “connected” with Scotland and Auchinleck until this ended with her premature death in 1789. Boswell continued to live in London following the death of his wife where his health gradually deteriorated, due, according to Tom Huntington, to his “carousing and whoring”. He died of kidney failure and uremia on May 19, 1795. Three weeks later he was laid to rest in the Boswell family mausoleum in Auchinleck. He had come home.



*Steps leading to the last resting place  
of James Boswell in the family  
Mausoleum in the old Auchinleck  
churchyard*

## Chronology

October 29, 1740	James Boswell is born in Edinburgh.
1753-1758	Boswell attends the University of Edinburgh.
May 16, 1763	James Boswell and Samuel Johnson met for the very first time.
1763-1764	Boswell studies law in Utrecht.
1764-1766	Boswell goes on a Grand Tour of Europe
July 26, 1766	Boswell completes his legal education.
1768	Boswell gains some fame as the author of “An Account of Corsica”.
November 25, 1769	Boswell marries his first cousin, Margaret Montgomerie, the daughter of his father's sister.
1782	Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck, dies, leaving Auchinleck House to James.
1784	Samuel Johnson dies. Boswell decides to write “The Life of Johnson”
1785	‘The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides’ is published.
1786	Boswell and family move to London.
January 11, 1788	Boswell elected Recorder (senior circuit judge) of Carlisle. He resigned the position in 1790.
June 4, 1789	Margaret Montgomerie, Boswell's wife, dies while James is en route from London to Auchinleck.
May 16, 1791	‘The Life of Johnson’ is finally published after years of hard work.
May 19, 1795	James Boswell dies in his house on Great Portland Street in London.

## Literary Works

*“In the 1920s a great part of Boswell's private papers, including intimate journals for much of his life, were discovered at Malahide Castle, north of Dublin. These provide a hugely revealing insight into the life and thoughts of the man. They were sold to the American collector Ralph H. Isham and have since passed to Yale University, which has published general and scholarly editions of his journals and correspondence. A second cache was discovered soon after and also purchased by Isham. A substantially longer edition of *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* was published in 1936 based on his original manuscript. His *London Journal 1762–63*, the first of the Yale journal publications, appeared in 1950. The last, *The Great Biographer, 1789–1795*, was published in 1989.*

*These detailed and frank journals include voluminous notes on the Grand Tour of Europe that he took as a young man and, subsequently, of his tour of Scotland with Johnson. His journals also record meetings and conversations with eminent individuals belonging to The Club, including Lord Monboddo, David Garrick, Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds and Oliver Goldsmith.”*

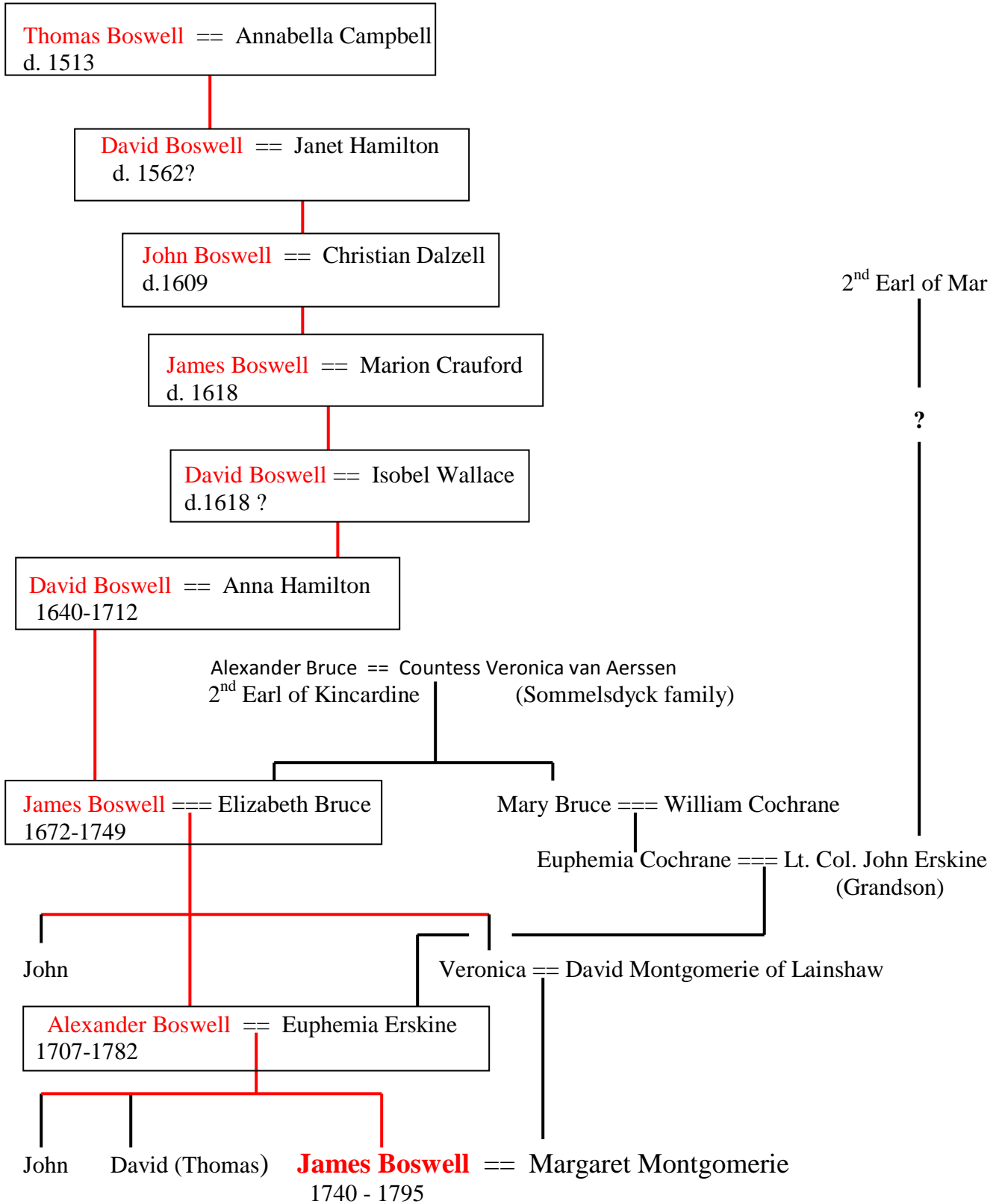
- *A View of the Edinburgh Theatre during the Summer Season (1759)(First Prose Work)*
- *The Cub at Newmarket* (1762, published by James Dodsley)
- *Dorando, a Spanish Tale* (1767, anonymously)
- *Account of Corsica* (1768)
- *The Hypochondriack* (1777–1783, a monthly series in the *London Magazine*)
- *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785)
- ***Life of Samuel Johnson*** (1791)
- *No Abolition of Slavery* (1791) (poem)
- *Life of Samuel Johnson, Facsimile Reprint of First Issue of the First Edition, bound with The Principal Corrections and Additions to the First Edition*, (2 volumes)

## Journals

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- *Boswell in Holland, 1763-1764, including his correspondence with Belle de Zuylen (Zeÿlide)*
- *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*
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- *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*

- *Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck 1778-1782*
- *Boswell, the Applause of the Jury, 1782-1785*
- *Boswell, the English Experiment, 1785-1789*
- *Boswell: The Great Biographer, 1789-1795*

## Lineage of the Lairds of Auchinleck





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