From the Editor

The recent arrival of two new biographies of Johnson has sent me in search of the many passages throughout his works in which Johnson expresses his strict sense of historical truth. Boswell mentions this aspect of Johnson's thinking often and at one point in his Life cites Johnson's review of Warton's Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope: "Nothing but experience could evince the frequency of false information. . . . Some men relate what they think, as what they know; some men of confused memories and habitual inaccuracy, ascribe to one man what belongs to another; and some talk on, without thought or care." Boswell continues, "Had he lived to read what Sir John Hawkins and Mrs. Piozzi have related concerning himself, how much would he have found his observation illustrated" (Life, 3: 229). Of course, Piozzi was more intimate with Johnson in many ways than Boswell, and Hawkins knew him longer. All three biographers had immediate experience with Johnson that it would be perilous to ignore. But, if even these contemporaries are prone to falsehood, what shall we say of present-day biographers?

Adam Gopnik's biographical essay on Johnson in The New Yorker (8 December 2008), which draws on the new books by Peter Martin and Jeffrey Meyer (as well as Hester, the new biography of Mrs. Thrale), is a case in point of the sort of thing that Johnson was always remarking. Meyer twice tells the famous story of Johnson and Osborne. The prolific biographer says, "Johnson once knocked down the bookseller Thomas Osborne with a folio volume (a duodecimo would not do), then put his foot on his neck and told him not to rise, threatening to compound the well-earned punishment by kicking him down the stairs" (p. 82). He tells the story again later, adding, "Osborne was eventually permitted to get up, and Johnson, always pressed for money, somehow made peace with his employer" (pp. 146-7). Readers of the News Letter know, thanks to O M Brack's article in the last number, that the story of the event, which took place in 1738, circulated in London for nearly forty years before it was first written down in The London Packet, as a parallel to a similar story about Goldsmith. The story was embellished by Tyers and Cooke, two of Johnson's earliest biographers. Both Thrale and Boswell asked Johnson for his account of the event, and both got the simple answer that Osborne was "imperti-

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