The lack of a major English dictionary was by the early eighteenth century a source of national embarrassment to the English nation in general and to the English intellectual world in particular. English dictionaries were available, but none could compare to the products of the two great continental academies: the Accademia della Crusca, who in 1612 issued its *Vocabulario degli Accademici della crusca*, and the French Royal Academy, whose members worked fifty-five years in compiling *Le dictionnaire de l'Academie francaise* (1694), and spent another eighteen years revising it.

For England, a dictionary would be the effort of an individual. Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison had toyed with the idea of compiling a dictionary; Ambrose Phillips went so far as to publish *Proposals for Printing an English Dictionary*, but the project was eventually dropped. Efforts had been made over the previous 100 years to help fill the void. Authors had compiled lists of hard or obsolete words, and these lists were issued as dictionaries. Some brave scholars had even tried to explain the origins of many words, but as etymology was in its infancy, success was very limited.

London publishers were acutely aware of the need for a national dictionary. Samuel Johnson was approached and he agreed to tackle the task. A group of publishers underwrote this expensive project. Johnson was to be paid £1,575 in installments, out of which he was to defray expenses and pay for any help he received. Johnson was aware that he faced a huge task; he visualized his effort not only as a scholar filling a void, but also as an Englishman contributing to the national literature.

Johnson's friend Dr. William Adams marveled that Johnson expected to finish the project in three years; Adams pointed out that it had taken the French Academy's forty members forty years to compile the French dictionary (in fact, it had taken the French Academy fifty-five years). Johnson was said to have replied: "Let me see; forty times forty is sixteen hundred. As three to sixteen hundred, so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman."

The task would take Johnson far longer than three years. The contract had been signed in June, 1746; the Dictionary did not appear in print until 1755. While most hailed the dictionary as the legitimate monument of erudition that it was, others were quick to express reservations. As Johnson himself once observed, nothing is more common than the erroneous belief that one is displaying judgment or taste by showing an unwillingness to be pleased. Rewarding and fitting were the words of Marquis Nicolini, president of the Accademia della Crusca, when he stated that "this very noble work" will be "a perpetual monument of fame to the author, an honour to his own country in particular, and a general benefit to the Republic of Letters throughout all Europe."

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