Lewis Namier once grandly observed that ‘every country and every age has dominant terms, which seem to obsess men’s thoughts. Those of eighteenth-century England were property, contract, trade, and profits’. Someone unprepared to follow Namier in taking such an extensive view might say that he is running different things together. This person might be tempted to quote Edmund Burke’s distinction between property as ‘sluggish, inert, and timid’ and ability as ‘a vigorous and active principle’. And he or she might then ask, what are ‘contract, trade, and profits’ if not the lawful struggles of ability against the interests of landed property? Namier would doubtless concede that estates were sluggish in eighteenth-century England and defend himself by pointing out that as the century wore on property became less a matter of land than of moveable wealth: banknotes, bills of credit, stock. This association of property and paper is the main reason why so many acts of parliament under the Hanoverians were passed concerning forgery, and why the punishments set for these crimes were so severe. There was no rigid distinction between ‘property’, on the one hand, and ‘contract, trade, and profits’, on the other. Appropriations and expropriations of ability and resources, both local and foreign, brought a teeming world of commerce into being, and from time to time this new wealth came to be invested in landed property. Seen correctly, Namier’s remark lets us glimpse one aspect of a central force in eighteenth-century Britain, a tension between property and appropriation or, if one prefers to accent the negative, between property and expropriation.

In the preceding chapters I have tried to be aware of this broad tension while focusing intently on Samuel Johnson. In no way does Johnson simply or singularly embody the great shifts and pulls of property and appropriation that characterise his times. In explaining the genesis of ‘the Age of Johnson’, I have remained sceptical about its
use in literary studies. Yet Johnson is taken, time and again, to represent both his age and his countrymen. I have been interested in how Johnson has been monumentalised by James Boswell and others, how he has become a national heritage, and how this influences what we can inherit from him. Boswell’s Johnson is a seductive figure in whom readers make deep emotional investments, and he is an example of the complex acts of appropriation and expropriation that characterise Boswell as a biographer. The figure and the example are closely bound together. Yet if ‘Boswell’s Johnson’ is a kind of property, one with its own critical and editorial history, the reactive move of seeking a ‘Johnson without Boswell’ does not so much escape questions of property as draw property lines too closely around Johnson.

One of the most determined questing for ‘Johnson plain’, Donald Greene, has rightly insisted on the independence, perspicacity and wisdom of Johnson’s writings, and rather less persuasively has bemoaned Boswell’s power to distract us from reading them. It is true that the *Life* does not always take us where we imagine it will, to the Samuel Johnson who wrote so much and so well, and that it frequently returns us to our guide: James Boswell. A biography may appear to be a convenient passage to the man or woman who interests us, but it almost always doubles back and asks us finally to value it for its own sake. I suspect that not very many who enjoy a biography of Charles James Fox ever seek out his *Speeches in the House of Commons*, splendid though the six volumes are. How many of us, actors included, who are delighted by a life of David Garrick feel that the next step is to read *The Lying Valet* or *Miss in Her Teens*? Or, more pointedly, one wonders if many readers of James Clifford’s *Young Samuel Johnson* and *Dictionary Johnson* went on to read the *Life of Savage* or the *Rambler*. I am inclined to think that the chances are that many of Clifford’s admirers put his book down and chose another biography from the shelves.

It is a pity that so much of the brilliant prose and lively drama of two hundred and fifty years ago is left unread or unperformed, but it is a mistake to think that a fine biography will ever lead us to these texts by its own lights. Greene would like a biography of Johnson the author rather than Johnson the talker, and proposes that we use the moralist’s writings to regulate the accidents of his conversation. But Johnson is not simply the property of the ‘serious student’, as Greene would have it, and a biographer must recognise first and foremost that Johnson is a man before he is an author. As Mr Rambler himself tells us, ‘for many reasons a man writes much better than he lives’ (Yale, iii, 75). Boswell
knew this, his Life shows it, and this is one reason for its popularity amongst serious students and lay readers. At times Boswell may well be, as ‘Peter Pindar’ said in a verse epistle, a ‘haberdasher of small ware’ but the satirist was perfectly right to concede in advance that he was ‘charming’. To resist this charm and demythologise Boswell, to show that he actually saw Johnson on at most 425 days out of the twenty-two years they knew each other, is a useful piece of work. If this makes us more attentive of the chasms in the Life, as it surely does, it also makes us more likely to admire the art of the biography in giving such an illusion of a complete and coherent Johnson. When we turn to James Clifford’s biographies of Johnson, so admired by Greene, we will be grateful for his scholarship and grace, but we will quietly measure his art against Boswell’s and find it lacking.

In reading and re-reading the Life of Johnson I have been struck by how powerfully it is governed by an economy of death. Boswell first saw Johnson as a ghost, first thought of writing his friend’s life while stretched out on a grave, and introduces his book by telling us that he plans to let the dead Johnson speak directly to us in ‘his own minutes, letters, or conversation’ (Life, i, 29). The usual economy of death is that the deceased does not leave the grave; it is right and proper to stay dead. For Boswell, however, Johnson has two tombs, one in Westminster Abbey and one in the Life. In the first tomb one does not speak, in the second one speaks endlessly, though with the help of someone to ‘explain, connect, and supply’ (Life, i, 29). Of all Johnson’s critics, it is Thomas Carlyle who has been most sensitive to this economy. The man of letters is a very curious kind of hero, he tells us. ‘He, with his copy-rights and copy-wrongs, in his squalid garret, in his rusty coat; ruling (for this is what he does), from his grave, after death, whole nations and generations who would, or would not, give him bread while living...’ Intellectual property survives the tomb and true literary authority can sometimes survive it far longer. What is so captivating about the Life is that it preserves two completely different sorts of literary authority, Johnson’s and Boswell’s. Of course, Johnson’s authority as a critic can be experienced only in reading his ‘Preface to Shakespeare’ or his ‘Life of Dryden’, to name two of my favourites, but Boswell’s task was to write a life, not an appreciation of criticism.

The ‘economic acts’ by which Boswell determines the law of Johnson’s tomb, appropriates his idiom and abridges his life by leaving chasms, are only part of what has interested me in writing this book. Johnson has become a national heritage, a cultural property, yet I have
been equally fascinated by how property was understood by him and his
times. Others have attempted to distil a Johnsonian economics from his
social and political writings, making comparisons or contrasts with
Bernard Mandeville, Adam Smith and others. I have tried to follow
Johnson over a short but concentrated period, from August to Novem-
ber, 1773, when he travelled about Scotland with Boswell. Here we see
Johnson concerned with entailed property and the idea of ‘proper
place’. We overhear him and Boswell talking about appropriation and
expropriation, about the Hanoverian vanquishing of the Jacobites and
the consequent breakdown of feudal life by the introduction of money.
Years before Johnson headed north, the Highlands had embarked on its
troubled passage from a ‘natural’ to a money economy. By 1773 the old
world of social subordination was being engaged by a new world of
economic exchange, and in his *Journey to the Western Islands* Johnson
broods on what he sees, testing and refining his general economic and
political views.

One of the most appealing aspects of Johnson is his steady emphasis
that all general views must be tested by daily experience. We live day by
day, both in and against the everyday, and the most common economic
acts – appropriating the world about us simply to maintain ourselves as
ourselves – are often the least familiar to us. Always, there is a pressure
to conform, to become ‘proper’, someone else, one of the crowd. We
read Boswell partly because of the sense he projects of everyday life
more than two hundred years ago, partly because he crosses that world
in such a singular and vivacious way. And we read Johnson partly
because he gives us strength to maintain our individuality, even when it
is sharply at variance with his own. In his own words, ‘what is nearest us,
touches us most’ (*Letters*, 1, 345).