

**JOHN BASKERVILLE
AND BENJAMIN FRANKLIN:
TWO MEN OF LETTERS**

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Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), the American statesman and diplomat, scientist, inventor and philosopher was certainly one of the most eminent visitors to Birmingham in England in the second half of the 18th century. A real polymath of the Age of the Enlightenment, Franklin has taken his place in history as one of the Founding Fathers of the United States of America. But his own favorite description of himself was 'Benjamin Franklin, Printer'. It is not surprising that he was interested in the work and business of his contemporary, the Birmingham printer John Baskerville (1706-1775). Their long-lasting friendship significantly influenced the history of Birmingham in the 18th century.

Their first meeting took place in the summer of 1758, when Franklin came to Birmingham with a letter of introduction to Matthew Boulton from William Small. At that time, Franklin was paying his second visit to England as the agent of the Assembly of Pennsylvania, to negotiate a long-standing dispute with the Penn family.

Franklin had already retired from the printing trade after almost 30 years, but continued to advise his partner, and to draw profits from the business.

Among his numerous London acquaintances there were several people from whom he might have heard about Baskerville — booksellers, particularly the Scottish-born William Strahan (1715-1785), a patron of literature, printer, and publisher of Samuel Johnson and Adam Smith. Franklin may also have known Baskerville's partner Robert Dodsley (1703-1764), a poet, publisher and bookseller. At that time, the map of the British colonies in America engraved in Philadelphia in 1755 was sold in Dodsley's shop, and this might have attracted Franklin's attention. He also met the Midlands character Dr Samuel Johnson, and occasionally James Boswell.

In his Autobiography, Franklin remembered his childish fondness for books, which determined his father to make him a printer. He entered the business at the age of twelve, as an apprentice to his own elder brother James, who was a printer in Boston.

In 1724, the eighteen year old Franklin came to England for the first time, and spent a year and a half here, working first at Samuel Palmer's, and then at John Watts' printing-houses in London. Watts' printing office in Little Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, had almost 50 workmen and was then one of the largest printing establishments in London.

Probably it was at this time that Franklin became professionally interested in the art of the typefounding.

At that time there were no letter-founders in the American Colonies, so all types had to be imported. English printing had been changed little since the time of Caxton, and typefounding was dominated by casts made in Dutch foundries.

Franklin took the opportunity to visit the foundry of Thomas James (d.1738), who later would be called *'the last of the old English letter founders'*. James had a large collection of old English types, and it was at his foundry that a few years earlier William Caslon (1692-1766), the famous British typefounder, had been encouraged to learn typefounding.

Franklin's first stay in England coincided with the time when William Caslon was working on his types. Although he was inspired by Dutch examples, Caslon's types would open a new era of modern English typefounding. D.B. Updike, a printer and the historian of printing types, remarks: *'While he [Caslon] modelled his letters on Dutch types, they were much better; for he introduced into his fonts a quality of interest, a variety of design, and a delicacy of modelling, which few Dutch types possessed.'*[1]

Benjamin Franklin probably was familiar with Caslon's enterprise, because it was partly financed by John Watts, Franklin's employer. In 1720 Caslon set

up his type foundry adjacent to the one at Oxford University. Within a decade he had become Britain's leading type founder.

Soon after his return to America in 1726, Franklin started his own printing house, but he still had to order Thomas James' type face, because it was not until 1734 that William Caslon issued his first specimen sheet.

By that time Franklin had been appointed public printer for Pennsylvania. In 1737 he introduced for the first time Caslon's types in his '*Pennsylvania Gazette*'. Soon large quantities of Caslon's types crossed the Atlantic and gradually became the standard medium for the American colonies. Many printers took the advice: '*When in doubt, use Caslon*'.

However, Baskerville's type was unlike anything that had come before it. Its rounded characters, strong contrasts between thicks and thins, proportions, and very fine sharp serifs clearly distinguished it from the old-style faces, and were also different from Caslon's types. (Baskerville had started his working life as a stone-cutter, so his style of lettering probably owed much to this background).

In his design Baskerville clearly expressed the aesthetical ideas of neoclassicism and 18th century rationalism. In October 1752, in the beginning of his experiments in printing, Baskerville sent to R. Dodsley some impressions of letters he had designed. Feeling that he was introducing a revolutionary new design, he wrote: '*Pray put it in no one's power to let Mr Caslon see them.*'[2]

While Franklin's main business was printing, and his prosperity was based on the profits from it, Baskerville turned his attention to typefounding and printing only after he had established himself as a successful businessman in the janning trade (Franklin bought some of Baskerville's japanned goods).

Baskerville had the luxury of working at leisure, and he could afford to work slowly, striving for the perfect expression of his aesthetic sensibilities. He spent almost eight years to prepare types, to construct the press, to experiment with ink and paper.

The first of Baskerville's books, the *Bucolica, Georgica et Aeneis* by Virgil, was printed in 1757. This book became an immediate success not only in Britain, but even on an intercontinental stage. There were 513 subscribers, among them - Matthew Boulton, Samuel Garbett, and Samuel Johnson. There were subscribers from the whole of Britain, and from distant places, such as Berlin, Russia, South Carolina, and Barbados. '*Ben. Franklin, Esq. of Philadelphia*' subscribed to six copies.

He presented one copy to Harvard College; some others were given to Franklin's friends who praised them highly. His Philadelphia friend Charles Thompson (1729-1824), the future Secretary of the Continental Congress, wrote in May 1758: '*I just now saw one of the Virgils you sent over. It is a most*

charming Letter and neatly done. It is indeed an Edition worthy of Virgil. I have with Mrs Franklin's leave taken one. I hope it will be agreeable to you. I shall now read Virgil with double pleasure.' [5]

Another copy was sent to Isaac Norris (1701-1766), the Speaker of the Assembly of Pennsylvania. Norris was known as an excellent scholar in French, Latin and Hebrew and author of the inscription on the Liberty Bell: '*Proclaim Liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.*'

Norris was so pleased with Baskerville's Virgil that he requested Franklin to enter him as a subscriber to any other classics which Baskerville might produce in the future: '*26 May 1758...Baskerville's Virgil is certainly a curious performance of the Press for which I return my thanks to the Donor...Please to let me know whether Baskerville [has] any other Classical Authors in the same Letter and which of them that I may have an Opportunity of contributing my Mite to encourage such a curious and Ingenious Man as Baskerville who has done an Honour to the English Press.*' [6]

When in the summer of 1758, Baskerville and Franklin actually met, Baskerville was working on his second book: *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* by Milton. Franklin certainly must have paid attention to the work of his fellow-printer, who wrote in the preface to the book: '*Mr Caslon is an Artist, to whom the Republic of Learning has great obligation; his ingenuity has left a fairer copy for my emulation, than any other master. In his great variety of Characters I intend not to follow him.*'

At the time of their meeting, both were middle-aged, self-made men, fifty-two years old, both of them successful and prosperous.

Baskerville's numerous visitors were very much impressed by the comfort and opulence of his house at Easy Hill, Birmingham. One of them wrote: '*His apartments are elegant; his stair-case is particularly curious; and the room in which he dines, and calls a smoking-room is very handsome; the grate and furniture belonging to it are, I think, of bright wrought iron and cost him a round sum...*' [3]

In his turn, remembering his youth and the start of the career, Franklin wrote: '*My breakfast was a long time bread and milk (no tea), and I ate it out of a two penny earthen porringer, with a pewter spoon. But mark how luxury will enter families, and make a progress, in spite of principle: being called one morning to breakfast, I found it in a China bowl, with a spoon of silver! They had been bought for me without my knowledge by my wife, and had cost her an enormous sum of three-and-twenty shillings, for which she had no other excuse or apology to make, but that she thought her husband deserv'd a silver spoon and China bowl as well, as any of his neighbours. This was the first appearance*

of plate and China in our house, which afterwards, in a course of years, as our wealth increas'd, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value.' [4]

Franklin certainly was impressed by what he saw at Baskerville's press at Easy Hill. He subscribed to Milton and informed Norris that '*Baskerville is printing Newton's Milton in two Volumes, 8o. I have inserted your name in his List of subscribers.'* [7]

Norris was equally pleased with Baskerville's edition of Milton: '*Having met a safe hand...who will take the trouble of delivering Baskerville's two volumes of Milton's works, I now send them by him to be neatly bound. As I have a very good Quarto Edition of Milton's Works printed in 1720 I shall chiefly value Baskerville's Edition for its elegancy and Neatness both on inside and the Covering.'* [8]

However, in spite of their mutual interest, Baskerville's and Franklin's professional careers and aims were very different from each other.

Benjamin Franklin was probably the most successful printer of his time. From 1729, when he became a master-printer, to 1748, when his partner David Hall took over the management of his business, 432 publications were recorded. Most of them were pamphlets, advertisements, job printings, government publications, almanacs and newspapers addressed to the general public — countless non-literary farmers, mechanics, artisans, shopkeepers who demanded news, practical information, and also action and entertainment.

He satisfied this demand with his *Pennsylvania Gazette* and '*Poor Richard's Almanack*', '*a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books*' and he '*endeavour'd to make it both entertaining and useful*'. The Almanack was immediate and lasting success. By 1750s it was selling at the rate of 10,000 copies a year.

There were still very few bibliophiles and connoisseurs in Colonial America, so there was no real market for fine and expensive printing. Although from the very beginning of his career as master printer Franklin intended to publish books, only about twenty full books were produced by his press.

In contrast, Baskerville's editions were not addressed to the masses, but to a few connoisseurs. He never wanted to produce a large number of books, but rather to improve the aesthetic appearance of the book, to set an artistic example for the British press, and to realize his own idea of a perfect book. '*It is not my desire to print many books; but such only, as are books of Consequence, of intrinsic merit, or established reputation, and which the public may be pleased to see in an elegant dress, and to purchase at such a price, as will repay the extraordinary care and expense that must necessarily be bestowed upon them.*'

Only about 50 titles were produced by Baskerville's press, and he never printed any cheap mass-editions.

His books were so expensive that a customer who had bought one of them as a specimen of Baskerville's work, would not wish to buy another. For this reason his printing business was never as financially successful as Franklin's.

It is worth noticing that Franklin was a man of letters in the ordinary sense. He strove to develop the ability of '*writing well in his Mother Tongue*'. He started writing at the age of 16, providing his brother's *New England Courant* with series of letters under the pseudonym of Silence Dogood. He enjoyed writing, and later he contributed widely to his own *Pennsylvania Gazette* and almanacs. Almost all his writings were occasional. He had to write for a particular audience, or on a particular event, quickly changing his tone and style. He created several pseudonyms and was able to vary the manner of his writing to express the imagined character of the supposed author.

On the other hand, Baskerville seems to have had little taste for letters. He was a type-founder and printer, not a scholar or a writer. This might be one of the reasons why he found it so difficult to choose books for printing. In 1757, Robert Dodsley who was deeply interested in Baskerville's work, offered to him some ideas: '*What think you of some popular French books? Gilblas, Moliere, or Telemaque?*'(9). But Baskerville clearly did not want to print what was 'popular'.

At this time, English literature was represented by many brilliant authors – Johnson, Smollett, Goldsmith, Pope, Walpole. However, all Baskerville's books printed as his own enterprise, were reprints. In 1761 it was proposed to him, to print an edition of Pope's works, but this came to nothing. It is as if this self-educated man was alarmed by great contemporary authors and fashionable celebrities, and preferred Latin classics instead.

Baskerville liked *Hudibras* (a mock-heroic poem by Samuel Butler, 1612-1680) and for a time he had an inclination to print it in quarto, but in the end this idea was also never realized.

Franklin was much more businesslike. Impressed with the great popularity of S. Richardson's 'Pamela', he quickly undertook a Philadelphia reprinting in 1742-44. Although this edition was not particularly successful financially, it is considered today one of the most notable productions of Franklin's press.

By the time of their meeting, Franklin, like Baskerville, had experience in printing a classical author – in 1744 he printed Cicero's '*Cato Major, or his Discourses of Old Age: with explanatory Notes*'. It was not undertaken for profit, but rather as a courtesy to a friend – and to all elderly readers, because he used type large enough for a person with failing eyesight to read it. Baskerville

might have considered Franklin's experience later, working on his Book of Common Prayer and using a type size '*calculated for people, who begin to want Spectacles but are ashamed to use them at Church*'. [10]

Neither Franklin nor Baskerville were orthodox believers. Franklin once remarked: '*I think vital religion has always suffered when orthodoxy is more regarded than virtue*'. Six weeks before his death he summed up his creed in a following way: '*I believe in one God, Creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to other Children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet with them.*' [11]

Baskerville was a strong and highly critical agnostic. The independence of his mind is shown in his will written in 1773: '*I consider revelation...exclusive of the scraps of morality casually intermixt with it, to be the most impudent abuse of common sense. Which ever was invented to befool mankind. ... The morality alone I profess to have been my religion and the rule of my actions to which I appeal how far my profession and practice have been consistent.*' [12]

Ironically, it was a Folio Bible, which would become the masterpiece of Baskerville's press. And almost half of the full books printed by Franklin were books of psalms or versified Scripture. In 1745 he printed a New Testament. Produced cheaply on low-cost paper, it was not a beautiful book. This work was a financial failure, because the consumers probably preferred imported brighter English editions, even if they cost a little extra. But in any case, it was the first English Bible printed in America...

This meeting of two fellow printers at Easy Hill, Birmingham in 1758, became the start of their close friendship and a long-lasting correspondence.

The following August, 1759, Franklin traveled to Scotland. He probably again passed through Birmingham, so he may have called on Baskerville again.

In Edinburgh, he met Adam Smith, William Robertson, Lord Kames, and Alexander Carlyle. At least two of these, Robertson and Carlyle, had visited Baskerville in 1758: '*Baskerville was on hands with his Folio Bible at this time... He dined with us that day, and acquitted himself so well that Robertson pronounced him a man of genius.*' (13). As both Franklin and Carlyle were subscribers to Milton, Baskerville's work might well have been one of the subjects of their conversation.

Franklin had a commission from his partner to buy new type for *Pennsylvania Gazette*. It is interesting that in spite of his admiration of Baskerville's type, he decided against buying it. The same decision he made in Glasgow,

where he visited the foundry of Alexander Wilson (1714-1784), the major supplier of William Strahan. In the end, he bought the traditional Caslon's type.

Franklin and his son William again passed through Birmingham in late September 1760, after their stop-over in Coventry and before their journey through Wales to Bristol and Bath. By that time, four editions of Baskerville's Milton had appeared, and at least two of the Book of Common Prayer, and Baskerville also had prepared specimen pages for the Bible. Franklin must have seen and discussed the work in progress [14].

For some reason, Baskerville's works were much criticized by many of his English contemporaries, *'probably because he did better work than other printers.'* [15] His print seemed too dazzling, his strokes too narrow, and his paper too glossy. One of the most common claims was that Baskerville's type would be *'a Means of blinding all the Readers in the Nation'*.

Although Franklin had not bought Baskerville's types, he was eager to support him. In 1760 he wrote to Baskerville how he had enjoyed presenting a page set in the traditional Caslon to such a critic, saying it was Baskerville's, and asking him to explain its poor points: *'He went over the several founts, shewing me everywhere what he thought Instances of that Disproportion; and declared, that he could not then read the Specimen without feeling very strongly the Pain he had mentioned to me. I spared him that time the Confusion of being told, that these were the Types he had been reading all his Life, with so much Ease to his Eyes; the Types his adored Newton is printed with, on which he has pored not a little; nay, the very Types his own Book is printed with, for he is himself an Author; and yet never discovered this painful Disproportion in them, till he thought they were yours.'* [16] Baskerville used Franklin's letter for the advertisement of his Folio Bible in 1763.

Late in 1764, Franklin returned to England on his second mission, and spent eleven years here. During this period, Baskerville was again in regular touch with him. In one of his letters he wrote: *'As the pleasantest Time o'Year for travelling is now approaching pray give us Your Company for a Month, and take a Bed at Easy Hill.'* [17]

At that time Baskerville's feelings towards his printing business had changed considerably. His Folio Bible, the masterpiece he printed for Cambridge University, had been a financial failure, as more than a third of the copies remained unsold. He was deeply disappointed, and in 1767 he wrote to Franklin: *'After having obtained the reputation of excelling in the most useful Art known to Mankind; of which I have your Testimony; Is it not to the last Degree provoking, that I cannot get even bread by it? I must starve, had I no other Dependence... I have offered the London Booksellers to print for them within 5*

per Cent. As low as their common Currency, but can not get from them a single Job... ' [18]

Depressed, he even tried several times to dispose of his printing equipment, but was unsuccessful.

In 1773, however, his plans changed, and he wrote to Franklin: *'I am enlarging My Foundry in Order to sell Types abroad, but first to our own Colony; in Consequence of which I beg Your good offices in sending them to any printing Houses You approve in any part of North America...'* [19]

In fact, it was due Franklin's support that Baskerville's type became more popular and admired in the United States than in his native land. Their rational, neoclassical forms corresponded well to the aesthetical ideas of the young America. Franklin wrote: *'The specimens I shall distribute by the first Ships among the printers in America, and I hope to your Advantage. I suppose no orders will come unaccompanied by Bills or Money, and I would not advise you to give any credit, especially as I think it will not be necessary.'* [20]

He encouraged Baskerville in his intention to enlarge his Foundry: *'Here are all the Matrices and Puncheons of James's Foundry to be sold; there seem to be among them some tolerable Hebrews and Greeks, and some good Blacks. I suppose you know them. Shall I buy any of them for you?'* [21]

Baskerville died in January 1775, shortly before Franklin returned to America to become a member of the Second Continental Congress and to help to draft the Declaration of Independence. Although the Declaration of Independence was printed not in Baskerville but in the more common Caslon type, he never forgot his English friend and fellow printer. When in 1775 the leading American publisher Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831) established his printing business, Franklin called him the 'Baskerville of America' because of the quality of his editions.

Both Franklin and Baskerville, independently of each other, wrote their own epitaphs.

Franklin, who mainly printed cheap mass editions, expressed his creed using the image of a beautiful book:

*The Body of
B.Franklin, Printer
(Like the Cover of an old Book
Its Contents torn out
And stript of its Lettering and Gilding)
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the work shall not be lost,
For it will (as he Believ'd) appear once more*

*In a new and more elegant edition,
Revised and Corrected
By the Author...*

John Baskerville, who printed many beautiful books, but was never involved in politics and had little chance to express his views and opinions, longed for liberty and independence of mind:

*Stranger –
Beneath this Cone in unconsecrated ground
A friend to the liberties of mankind directed his body to be inhum'd.
May the example contribute to emancipate thy mind
From the idle fears of superstition
And the wicked arts of Priesthood.*

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