

type

The SECRET HISTORY
of LETTERS

SIMON LOXLEY

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

4 | The maverick tendency: the type and strange afterlife of John Baskerville

The catacombs of Christ Church, normally a silent chamber of the dead, were, on this spring morning in 1893, filled with the living. It was an august gathering, including not only the Mayor of Birmingham, Lawley Parker, but Canon Wilcox the vicar, a coroner, a doctor, a surveyor, and Talbot Baines Reed, the type historian whose collection would later form the basis of London's St Bride Library. Under the low ceiling of the vault, their tall hats scraped the roof. Two men in workman's clothes stood ready, chisels and hammers in hand.

'Usually, we would never allow such an undertaking,' the canon was explaining in a low voice to the reporter from the *Birmingham Daily Ageus*. 'It's only because this vault, which belonged to Mr Barker, our churchwarden back in the twenties, has no record of anyone actually having been interred within it. Therefore, the Church authorities have allowed the unprecedented step of opening it to see what, if anything, is inside.'

The assembly watched in silence as the men set to work. Their efforts soon removed the outer brickwork, only to reveal another wall.

'This looks unpromising,' whispered the canon. 'There can hardly be room for a casket behind that, surely.'

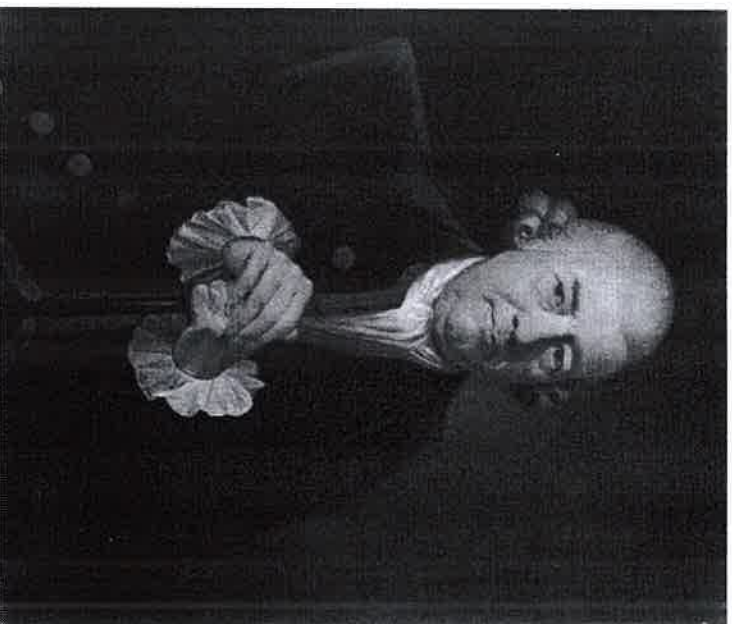
Taking up his tools once more, one of the workmen deftly knocked out two bricks from this second layer, and inserted his hand cautiously through the opening. 'There's a coffin in there, all right,' he informed the expectant dignitaries behind him. He resumed his efforts, and more bricks fell away. Baines Reed leaned forward excitedly. 'It's made of lead,' he exclaimed, 'and there appears to be something on the front.'

The glow from the wall light in the vault was subdued, but bright enough for the onlookers to see, soldered on to the head of the casket, reversed-image letters – metal type. They spelled out two words: John Baskerville.

'Gentlemen,' said Baines Reed, 'I think we've found our man.'

John Baskerville was a type designer by reason of personal

15 John Baskerville, painted by James Millar, the date unknown but probably towards the end of his life. Printing and type, his personal obsession for nearly a quarter of a century, left him disillusioned; this Business of Printing; which I am heartily tired of, & repent I er [ever] attempted', he wrote as early as 1762.



interest and obsession; it was not his profession or, despite his best efforts, a source of income. Indeed, the printing of his designs, for Baskerville an inseparable part of the process, became a considerable drain on his finances. He was a superb example of an eighteenth-century Renaissance man, capable of turning his mind to a wide variety of subjects, and arriving at original and practical solutions. In this way he is reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin, most renowned as a co-author and signatory of the Declaration of Independence, but a multi-faceted personality: printer, scientist, philosopher and one-time deputy postmaster general for the American colonies. It is perhaps unsurprising in the comparatively small world of eighteenth-century intellectual life that the two should have met, but Franklin was also to become a staunch supporter of Baskerville at a time when his own countrymen were largely antagonistic towards his work.

The only known portrait of Baskerville made during his lifetime shows a determined figure well kitted out in gold brocade, looking slightly disapproving of the business of having his portrait painted. But there is the

ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, below a pair of lively eyes. You get the feeling he is about to burst out laughing any moment at the absurdity of it all.

Baskerville was born in January 1706, or possibly late December 1705, in the parish of Wolverley in Wores-tershire, in the English Midlands. His family were financially comfortable, but there is little concrete information about his life until 1728, when his name appears on a mortgage indenture on a Wolverley property, possibly to raise money to set him up in business. It has been claimed that in his late teens he worked as a footman. This would at first seem unlikely given his family's status, but Baskerville is supposed to have once declared that he had worked his way up from being a servant, so it may contain an element of truth.¹ Hidden away on the back of a pillar on the top floor of Birmingham Central Library is a small, engraved black slate sign:

Grave Stones
Cut in any of the Hands
John Baskervill
WRITING-MASTER

(The final e at the end of his name arrived later.) It seems likely that he at least designed, but possibly also cut, gravestones. If the money in 1728 was for business purposes, it would have been to start Baskerville as a teacher, a writing master. The slate sign is a beautiful piece of letter cutting, each line of text executed in a different style, as befitting its purpose as an advertisement: an ornate script, lower case roman, black letter and italic capitals. So his later move into type design wasn't an illogical one – he already had a solid background and experience in creating fine letter forms.

After his father's death in 1738 Baskerville began what was to be a profitable career as a japanner. Japanning was the application of a black varnish to metal household objects such as snuff boxes, buttons, candlesticks and picture frames, the resulting effect supposedly like fine mahogany or tortoiseshell. In the early years of the eighteenth century Birmingham had undergone a commercial revolution, and there was a great demand for such goods. No known example of Baskerville's work in this field survives, but the business made him wealthy,

¹ John Dreyfus, in his article 'Baskerville's Books' in *Book Collector*, 1959, cites the Swede Bengt Ferner, who mentions this fact in his account of his visit to the Baskervilles.

although not enough to retire. He continued jappanning until a couple of years before his death.

By 1748, he had prospered to the extent that he was able to move into his newly built house, Easy Hill, the site of which is now in the centre of Birmingham. On the land lease he is described as a 'boxmaker'. As a clear indication of Baskerville's maverick tendencies, he was almost immediately joined there by his mistress Sarah Eaves. Sarah was already married with five children, but her husband had deserted her in 1745; only on his death in 1764 were she and Baskerville able to marry.

Baskerville's domestic set-up doubtless invoked moral disapproval, and although Sarah was a regular churchgoer, Baskerville seems to have become increasingly truculent towards organized religion and its ministers. It was said of him: 'He had wit, but it was always at the expense of religion and decency, particularly if in company with the clergy.'² His friend William Hutton was later to make a sympathetic appraisal of Baskerville's character in his *History of Birmingham*, written in 1835: 'If he exhibited a peevish temper, we may consider that good nature and intensive thinking are not always found together.'

Baskerville started printing in about 1751. What is striking about his work, always peripheral to his main occupation, was that Baskerville set about trying to improve the entire process, from the presses he used to the paper and the ink – and, of course, the nature of the characters he was printing. Technically printing had altered little since Gutenberg's day, but Baskerville was about to push it on to a new level. William Caslon's founts were the dominant force in English typography in this period, but Baskerville considered that their effect was frequently ruined by bad printing. It seemed essential to him that a type foundry should have its own printing press.

Probably unsurprisingly for someone used to analysing the quality and nature of black in the jappanning trade, Baskerville was determined to produce ink that was blacker than that currently available. Once he had perfected his formula, his ink was left to stand for about three years before he used it. He also experimented with paper technology, reasoning that the quality of the printed letter could not improve if the quality of the paper did not. Using a closely guarded method of hot-pressing the paper between copper plates or cylinders to

² The Reverend Mark Noble, an uncomplimentary commentator on both Baskerville and Sarah, in his *A Biographical History of England* (1806).

achieve an unprecedented smoothness, he then created a gloss surface, possibly after the sheets were printed, using a varnishing technique borrowed from japanning. This was a breakthrough, but one that was unfortunately to prove a key factor in his subsequent lack of commercial success in this new field.

In 1758 Baskerville met Benjamin Franklin, who had come to England with an introduction to Matthew Boulton. Boulton was a successful Birmingham manufacturer of silverware and ran a mint. He was also a founder member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, a group of scientists that included in its ranks James Watt and Joseph Priestley.³ Having himself worked in the printing trade both in England and the American colonies, Franklin was probably just as interested in meeting Baskerville, who had in 1757 produced his first book, the works of the Roman author and poet Virgil, printed by him and using his own type. This was seen as a sound commercial choice, as Virgil was experiencing a current upsurge in popularity.

The book was a creative triumph, not only for its production qualities, but also for its type and layout – although this was not unprecedented, Baskerville designed his title pages using wide letterspacing, and they have an elegance that contemporary productions lacked. Again untypically for the time, he relied on almost pure type for his effects, with very little ornamentation. Baskerville may have been spurred into type production by seeing the specimens issued by the Birmingham type founder William Anderton in 1753, and he may also have met Samuel Caslon, brother of William, at around the same time. Of his own type, Baskerville said he had ‘endeavoured to produce a Set of Types according to what I conceived to be their true proportion’.⁴

In other areas he was just as meticulous. Of a print run of two hundred books he would discard about fifty as failing to pass his quality control standards, and he would use his type only once, to avoid any subsequent damage or deterioration to the characters. Although possibly self-educated, he was a meticulous proofreader. (Later Baskerville productions, on which he relinquished the editorial chores to others, failed to maintain this standard.) A 1757 letter from his London bookseller, Robert Dodsley, finds the writer apologizing

³ James Watt (1736–1819) – not the inventor of the steam engine, but he improved it and made it commercially viable.

Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) carried out ground-breaking work on gases, and discovered oxygen.

⁴ Preface to *Paradise Regained*, 1759.

for having advertised the Virgil as appearing at a certain date, a publication schedule now impossible owing to Baskerville's lengthy proof-correcting. When the Virgil finally appeared, Benjamin Franklin himself bought six copies, along with a selection of japanned goods.

However, Baskerville's work was collecting a growing force of detractors. Said one critic: 'We told him that the exceeding sharpness of his letter, and the glossy whiteness of his paper, both beyond anything we had been used to, would certainly offend.'⁵ The paper seemed to cause the most irritation; it was too white, too shiny. But some found his type 'too sharp', as well. Baskerville's face is now described as Transitional; in contrast to Caslon's Old Style lettering there was greater differentiation between the thick strokes and the thin strokes, and this was the root of the trouble.

Franklin was valiantly and at times impishly fighting Baskerville's corner, and we have a marvellous example of his support in a letter of 1760. It was sent from Franklin's house in Craven Street, near what is now Charing Cross Station in London:

Let me give you a pleasant instance of the prejudice some have entertained against your work. Soon after I returned, discoursing with a gentleman concerning the artists of Birmingham, he said you would be a means of blinding all the readers in the nation; for the strokes of your letters, being too thin and narrow, hurt the eye, and he could never read a line of them without pain. 'I thought,' said I, 'you were going to complain of the gloss of the paper, which some object to.' 'No, no,' said he, 'I have heard that mentioned, but it is not that; it is in the form and cut of the letters themselves; they have not that height and thickness of the stroke, which make the common printing so much the more comfortable to the eye.' ... Yesterday he called to visit me, when, mischievously bent to try his judgement, I stepped into my closet, tore off the top of Mr. Caslon's specimen, and produced it to him as yours, brought with me from Birmingham; saying, I had been examining it, since he spoke to me, and could not for my life perceive the disproportion he mentioned, desiring him to point it out to me. He readily undertook it, and went over the several founts, showing me everywhere what he thought

AEM
fgh

16 Baskerville: 'the means of blinding the nation', a shock to contemporary eyes. The thin strokes have become thinner, the serifs finer.

⁵ E. E. Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham: letter founder and printer*, London, 1975, citing Edward Rowe Mores, *A Dissertation upon English Typographical Foundries and Foundries*.

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 Newron 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.⁶

Baskerville must have been justifiably amused on reading this, yet may be excused a growing feeling that they were all out to get him. He clearly appreciated the letter, though, and used it as advertising copy for his 1763 edition of the Bible.

He must have chuckled at the unconscious criticism of Caslon; Baskerville comes across as an eighteenth-century Brian Wilson to Caslon's Beates, driven to creative heights by a sense of rivalry of which only he was aware. In a letter to Robert Dodsley giving impressions of some of his punches, he adds the nervous postscript: 'Pray put it in no-one's power to let Mr Caslon see them.' In the Preface to his edition of *Paradise Regained*, Baskerville praises Caslon in a way that reveals his obsession with him, and his belief that he had bettered him at his own game:

Mr Caslon is an Artist, to whom the Republic of Learning has great obligations; 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; the Roman and Italic are all I have hitherto attempted; if in these he has left room for improvement, it is probably more owing to that variety which divided his attention than to any other cause. I honour his merit, and only wish to derive some small share of Reputation from an Art which proves accidentally to have been the object of our mutual pursuit.

Whatever opinion Baskerville had of his own work, the public just weren't buying in great enough numbers. He had to borrow money to produce his Bible, and a letter of 1762 to the Member of Parliament Horace Walpole lays bare his financial woes and sense of grievance; although

⁶ *Letters of the famous 18th Century printer John Baskerville of Birmingham together with a bibliography of works printed by him at Birmingham*, ed. Leonard Jay, Birmingham, 1932.

he has lowered his prices as much as he can, booksellers will not give him orders. He professes himself 'heartily tired' of the printing business, in which he wishes he'd never got involved: 'It is surely a particular hardship that I should not get Bread in my own Country (and it is too late to go abroad) after having acquired the Reputation of excelling in the Most useful Art known to Mankind, while everyone who excels as a Players [*sic*], Fidler, Dancer, &c. not only lives in Affluence, but has it in their power to save a fortune.'⁷

Baskerville goes on to say that he is trying to sell his complete business to a European court, though this would be a national disgrace; a friend who had been given 'a handsome premium for a quack Medicine' by Parliament had suggested he approach them for finance himself. Baskerville is feeling sorry for himself, but his lamentations have a familiar ring to them – the creative mind that has to leave Britain or seek foreign investment for proper recognition of their abilities. A 1767 letter to the ever loyal Franklin found Baskerville offering his business to the Court of France. The French were interested, but the nation's coffers, they regretted, had been left too impoverished by the recent Seven Years War (1756–63), in which France had lost most of its North American possessions to Britain. There is a suggestion that Louis XV may have offered Baskerville an apartment in the Louvre if he would move to Paris and print, but if this is true, the offer was not taken up.

Baskerville seems to have got so sick of it all by the end of the 1760s that he let one of his foremen, Robert Martin, take over the printing. He was stung into re-entering the fray in 1772, when a local printer, Nicholas Boden, made it known he was printing a Bible; Baskerville responded with his second version of the good book, and seems to have become interested in the business again. Franklin wrote to him in 1773, informing him that he would distribute Baskerville's specimens among American printers, and telling him of some matrices from another foundry which were up for sale. 'You speak of enlarging your foundry,' says Franklin, and adds, 'There seems to be among them some tolerable Hebrews and Greeks, and some good blacks. I suppose you know them. Shall I buy them for you?' The eventual purchaser was Caslon.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 'blacks' were Old English-style lettering.

In 1773 Baskerville once again sought to persuade the French court to buy 'my whole apparatus of Letter-founding and printing'. He died two years later with the said apparatus still unsold, and one must suppose with one of the great passions of his life having left him with a bitter taste. Sarah, revealed by an early account to be a highly capable individual herself, and clearly familiar with Baskerville's paper-making processes, went on to produce a Baskerville type specimen in 1777, and in 1779 sold the type to the French dramatist Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*; purchasing on behalf of the Literary and Typographical Society in France, Beaumarchais wanted to print the complete works of Voltaire using Baskerville's founts.

Later, after Sarah's own death, the punches made their way to Paris, from which new type was cast; in the turbulent years of the French Revolution it was used to print the *Gazette Nationale*, the official journal of the French Republic. So Baskerville's typographic innovations, which had fallen so flat in Britain, found a new lease of life across the English Channel, helping to fuel a political, social and intellectual revolution.

Although his type brought him little honour or profit in his own country, by the 1760s some English type founders had taken note and, perceiving that a change in typographic style was on the horizon, produced their own versions. The most notable of these was what came to be known as Fry's Baskerville, first offered in 1766 by Isaac Moore, a partner in the Fry and Pine type foundry. What was later cited as the last use of Baskerville before its revival in the twentieth century was an 1827 reprinting of *The Treatise of Fysshinge with an Angle*, purportedly with 'the types of John Baskerville', but actually Fry's Baskerville. The newspaper owner and publisher John Bell branched out into type founding in 1788, and the face that bears his name, as revived by Monotype on the centenary of his death in 1931, owes more to Baskerville than it does to Caslon.

However, although dead, the irrepressible Baskerville was still to make his presence known for a number of years. Towards the end of his life he had become interested in windmills, and had one built in the grounds of Easy Hill. His will specified that he was to be buried

in a vault in this 'conical building', upright. His epitaph was a last swipe at the Church:

Stranger —

Beneath this Cone in unconsecrated ground
A friend to the liberties of mankind, directed his body
to be inhum'd.

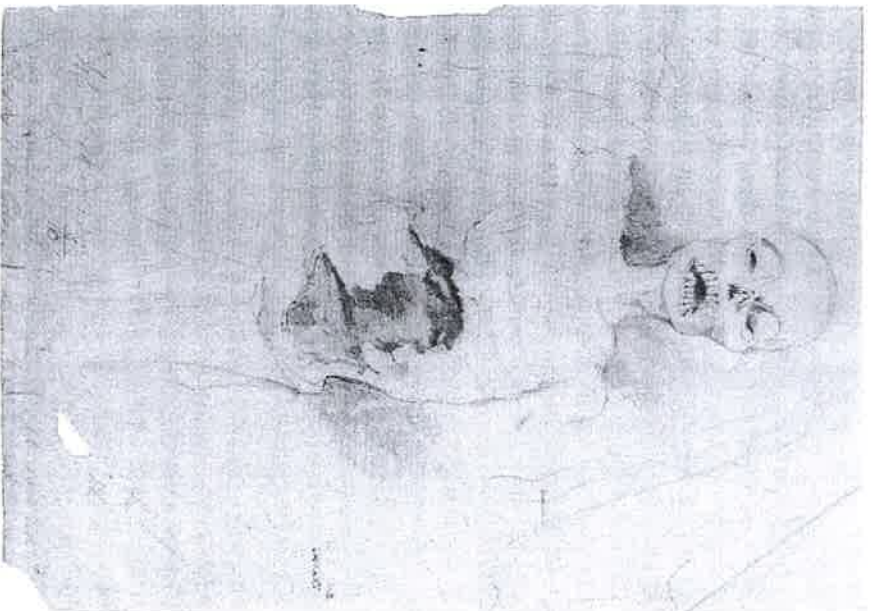
May the example contribute to emancipate thy mind
From the idle fears of superstition
And the wicked arts of Priesthood.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Easy Hill was wrecked in the Birmingham Riots of 1791,⁹ and the mill was demolished, although the body was left undisturbed. That is until 1820, when Birmingham's ever increasing industrial growth took a hand. The owner of the land cut a canal through it, and built a wharf. Baskerville's lead coffin was unearthed and opened. The body was in a good state of preservation. The skin on the face was dry; the eyes were gone but the eyebrows, eyelashes, lips and teeth remained. The body gave off 'an exceedingly offensive and oppressive effluvia, strongly resembling decayed cheese'.¹⁰ The coffin was hastily closed, and supposedly given to Baskerville's surviving relations for reburial. However, this didn't happen. The coffin was left in a warehouse on the property for eight years, where for a payment of sixpence anyone who wanted to have a look at the body might do so.

In 1829, Baskerville's remains were moved to a plumber and glazier's shop. Once again the coffin was opened, and a local artist, Thomas Underwood, made a sketch. Underwood recounted how the 'effluviium' made people ill, and how a surgeon, who had taken a piece from the shroud and put it in his coat pocket, was dead within a matter of days. Underwood himself, he gratefully assured us, suffered only loss of appetite for a week.

Eventually Baskerville was reputed to have been re-buried next to Cradley Chapel, a property belonging to a branch of the Baskerville family. However, the story was more complex. Marston the plumber, on whom the responsibility for finding a resting place for the corpse seems to have devolved, had trouble finding a berth for it because of Baskerville's uncompromising attitude to religion during his lifetime. A bookseller called Mr Knott

⁹ Joseph Priestley spoke out in favour of the French Revolution, and in doing so started a riot. His own house was burnt down in the ensuing commotion.
¹⁰ From J. A. Langford, *Dishonourment of Mr Baskerville*, Birmingham, 1821.



¹⁷ The disinterment of John Baskerville. Thomas Underwood's hasty drawing following a reopening of the coffin in 1829. The 'effluvium' noted in 1821 still lingered, supposedly causing illness and death. '... the sketch shows correctly what I saw of the remains of the man who was an artist in every sense of the word, and will ever deservedly be famous as one of the worthies of our town, who spread its fame the wide world over,' wrote Underwood.

told Marston that with the proper permission the coffin could be placed in his family vault in Christ Church" in Birmingham. Marston's friend, Mr Barker, was by chance churchwarden of Christ Church; permission was refused, but Barker let Marston know where the key to the vault was kept, and turned a blind eye. Marston sneaked the coffin in on a hand cart. A notice was later put in the press to the effect that the body had been buried on some erstwhile property of the Baskervilles near Dudley, and consequently for many years there was confusion about the site of final interment.

In 1893, following a lecture on Baskerville by Talbot Baines Reed, it was decided to solve the mystery of his resting place. The result was the strange scene enacted in the catacombs of Christ Church. Despite some protests as to the propriety of the proceedings, the remains of John Baskerville were once again brought to light.¹²

¹¹ Christ Church was demolished in 1897. Its site was in what is now Victoria Square in Birmingham.

¹² This wasn't the end of Baskerville's movements, however. Following the demolition of Christ Church in 1897, he was reinterred in Warstone Lane cemetery, a former sandpit just north of Birmingham's jewellery quarter. A catacomb had been built into the side of one of the pits, and here Baskerville was finally laid to rest. Vandalism in the 1970s resulted in all the catacomb entrances being sealed up, with Baskerville's memorial tablet from Christ Church also inside. Sarah negotiated the social minefield more successfully than her husband, and has a memorial

Baskerville's type is categorized as Transitional. In simple terms this means that there is a greater contrast in thickness between the thick strokes and the thin ones than there was in Old Style. In the later 'Modern' faces the contrast became even more pronounced. Caslon was Old Style, Baskerville was Transitional, and there lay the problem for contemporary readers. So many versions of Caslon have been produced in the twentieth century, some even making it more of a Transitional face, that it is hard now to make an accurate comparison. But the Old Face or Old Style versions are more uniform in their stroke weight than Baskerville, which has quite fine thin strokes, and pointed serifs. It looked very alien to the eighteenth-century eye, especially enhanced by the new clarity that Baskerville had brought to the printing. But it's an elegant face, wider than those of his contemporaries. And when it was set it looked even; there was no wavering up and down:

He was not an inventor but a perfecter... He concentrated upon spacing. He achieved amplitude not merely by handsome measurement but by letting in the light. He married paper and type in what was called a 'kissing impression'. Look at the title page of his Virgil. It seems no more than a series of lines of capitals centred over one another, as by a combination of logical arrangement and formula. But this is artifice at a height: the art of concealing the care and sense of balance which has taken infinite pains to obtain the right interlinear spacing and letter-spacing, the right gradations of size.¹³

In his lifetime, Baskerville ended up as the archetypal prophet without honour in his own country. However, Birmingham has since put matters right. The site of Easy Hill is now an elevated piazza containing the city war memorial. Baskerville House, a monolithic 1930s municipal building with classical pillars, is closed at the time of writing and awaiting redevelopment. In between these two structures is a delightful sculpture: six stone representations of punches, each carrying on the top a reversed letter in metal. Together they spell 'Virgil'. It is deserved recognition; Baskerville made breakthroughs on several fronts, and the changes he brought to type design were to be a catalyst for developments in the years to follow. But it was Italy that was to pick up the baton.

in the churchyard of St Philip's in the city centre
¹³ Francis Meynell, *English Printed Books*, London, 1946..