
JOHN BASKERVILLE
TYPE-FOUNDER AND PRINTER, 1706-1775

JOSIAH HENRY BENTON

TWO CENTURIES OF
TYPEFOUNDING ANNALS

JOHN FINDLAY McRAE



THOENES
PRESS



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in the smoothing away of every chance irregularity left by the casing, without interfering with the mathematical height and squareness of the letter.* Then there were the press and the ink.

Baskerville constructed his own presses. From the beginning, even as early as 1752, he had a press in operation on which he printed his specimens. He wrote to Dodsley: "I have with great pains justified the plate for the Platten & Stone on which it falls, so that they are as perfect planes as it will ever be in my Power to procure, for instance, if you Rest one End of yr plate in the Stone & let the other fall the height of an inch; it falls soft as if you dropped it on feathers or several folds of silk, and when you raise it, you manifestly feel it such (if you'll excuse so unphilosophical a term). Wet the two and either would support the other with a couple of 500 weights added to it, if held perpendicularly. To as perfect a plane I will endeavour to bring the faces of the type if I have time. Nor do I despair of better ink & printing (the character must speak for itself) than has hitherto been seen."

He said in a letter to France, that the presses were exactly of the same construction as other people's, but that he had made them better, especially in the stone and the platen, all of which could be done with a person who gave attention to it; and that in printing he used but one double of finest flannel, other people used two or three double of thick swanskin; and for a description and drawing of his presses he referred to Palmer's "History of Printing," and "The History and Art of Printing," by Luckombe, in which he said there was a print of every part of the press.

* *Reed's Old English Letter Foundries* (1882).

Baskerville appears to have kept a large number "of hot plates of copper ready, between which, as soon as printed (aye, as they were discharged from the tympan) the sheets were inserted; the wet was thus expelled, the ink set, and the trim glossy surface put on all simultaneously."* The peculiar gloss which characterizes the productions of the Baskerville Press is to be found in no other books of the eighteenth century.

Again, as to ink, a black in an impure state had been used by printers for nearly two hundred years, and it was not until Baskerville that any attention was turned to this most essential article. It was reserved for him to discover a superior kind of black for the purpose required. Hansard thinks that to this success may be attributed, in a great measure, the excellence of his printing.

Hansard gives the recipe of Baskerville's ink: "He took of the finest and oldest linseed oil three gallons, this was put into a vessel capable of holding four times the quantity, and boiled with a long-continued fire till it acquired a certain thickness or tenacity, according to the quality of the work it was intended to print, and which was judged of by putting small quantities upon a stone to cool, and then taking it up between the finger and thumb; on opening which, if it drew into a thread an inch long or more, it was considered sufficiently boiled. This mode of boiling can only be acquired by long practice, and requires particular skill and care in the person who superintends the operation, as, for want of this, the most serious consequences . . . have very frequently occurred; the oil thus prepared was suffered to cool, and had then a small quantity of black or amber rosin dissolved in it, after which it was allowed some months to sub-

* *Hansard's Typographia* (1825), page 311.

side; it was then mixed with the fine black, before named, to a proper thickness, and ground for use."*

The lamp-black of commerce is crude and impure, but for two hundred years it satisfied the makers of printing-ink, who made no improvement in their ink. "It was not until the days of the celebrated Baskerville . . . that any attention was turned to this most essential article. . . . It was reserved for him to discover . . . a superior kind of black, . . . and to this success it is said that the superiority of his printing may be attributed."† Certain it is that it stimulated rivalry in the trade, and a few out of many other attempts to improve were partially successful.

Finally there was the text. Baskerville wrote Dodsley his scheme for obtaining absolutely correct texts of the works he was about to print, as follows: "T is this. Two people must be concerned; the one must name every letter, capital, point, reference, accent, etc., that is, in English, must spell every part of every word distinctly, and note down every difference in a book prepared on purpose. Pray oblige me in making the experiment with Mr. James Dodsley in four or five lines of any two editions of an author, and you 'll be convinced that it's scarcely possible for the least difference, even of a point, to escape notice. I would recommend and practise the same method in an English author, where most people imagine themselves capable of correcting. Here's another great advantage to me in this humble scheme; at the same time that a proof sheet is correcting, I shall find out the least imperfection in any of the Types that has escaped the founder's notice."

"Meanwhile he had laboured assiduously to complete his promised series of the Roman and Italic faces. At the time of

* *Hansard's Typographia*, page 723.

† *Ibid.*, page 717.

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the publication of the Virgil, he put forward a quarto sheet containing specimens of the Great Primer, English, Pica, and Brevier Roman, and Great Primer and Pica Italic, beautifully printed. This sheet, which is noted by Renouard, and which is occasionally found bound up with copies of the Virgil, was very shortly followed, about the end of the year 1758, by a larger and more general specimen, consisting entirely of Roman and Italic letter in eight sizes, viz.:—Double Pica, Great Primer, English, Pica, Small Pica, Long Primer, Bourgeois, and Brevier. Of the last two, Roman only is shown. The whole is arranged in two columns on a broadside sheet, with appropriate titlings, and forms a beautiful display. Although the only copy we have seen is printed on a greenish paper, somewhat coarse, the specimen exceeds in elegance and uniformity most, if not all, the productions of contemporary founders."*

The Virgil was then advertised as follows: "John Baskerville proposes, by the advice and assistance of several learned men, to print from the Cambridge Edition, corrected with all possible care, an elegant edition of Virgil. The work will be printed in quarto, on a very fine writing Royal paper, and with the above letter. The price of the Volume in sheets will be one guinea, no part of which will be required till the Book is delivered. It will be put to press as soon as the number of subscribers shall amount to five hundred, whose names will be prefixed to the work."

Finally, after many delays caused by the desire of Baskerville to have the book perfect, the Virgil went to press in 1757, after seven years of careful, patient, persistent work upon it. It was a surprise to the literary world. It was the first fine book printed

* *Reed's Old English Letter Foundries*, page 276.

in England,—the first of those magnificent editions which, as Macaulay said, “went forth to astonish all the librarians of Europe.”* Every part of the volume was in harmony with every other part. There was no disproportion. The book has been well said to be a landmark in the history of typography. In looking at it to-day we wonder how it was done when it was done. It seems as though the Birmingham artist had come before his time.

The list of subscribers printed in the book comprises 513 names, and it is a wonderful list. Scholars and libraries throughout the country are upon it. There is one subscriber from Copenhagen, another from Berlin, and another from the Island of Barbadoes. Dr. Samuel Johnson ordered one copy for his old Oxford College. It is interesting for us to see that the Public Library, Philadelphia, subscribed for a copy, and that “The Library Company at Charles-Town, South Carolina,” and “Mr. Isaac Mazyck of Charles-Town in South Carolina,” took each a copy. The while Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia subscribed for six. The conservatism of the English bookseller, however, was such that no bookseller subscribed for more than one copy except Dodsley, who was concerned in the making of the book, and took twenty copies.

This first issue of Virgil was in royal quarto, and it was the first book printed on wove paper; that is, as I understand it, on paper laid on flannel or flats, and showing no marks of wire. The critical Harwood pronounced it “the best printed book that the typographical art ever produced.”† Dibdin said of it “I have always considered this beautiful production as one of

* *Macaulay's History of England*, volume ii.

† *Harwood's Classics*, page 172.

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the most finished specimens of typography. It was the earliest publication of Baskerville, and all the care and attention of that ingenious printer were devoted to render it unrivalled. He secured his reputation by it, and though it has a few typographical errors, yet it is esteemed by all collectors."

The original issue is distinguished from the subsequent issues of 1757 by the fact that in the original the supplementary names in the list of subscribers numbered four only, while in the re-impressions they numbered twenty-four. In the original the titles on pages 342 and 372 are "Liber Decimus Aeneidos, Liber Undecimus Aeneidos." In the re-impressions they are uniform with the other titles, "Aeneidos, Liber Decimus; Aeneidos, Liber Undecimus." It may also be noticed that on the running title of page 33, in the original edition, there is a space between the i and r in VIRGILI.

Encouraged by the success of his Virgil, Baskerville sought another book of importance to print with his types. Tonson, the London bookseller, had the copyright of Milton, and he finally employed Baskerville to print an edition. This was issued in 1758, and is of signal merit and beauty. Reed says that "as a work of fine printing it equals, if it does not excel, the Virgil." It is worthy of note that the very high gloss on the paper which characterized most of Baskerville's later work is not found either in the Virgil of 1757, or the Milton of 1758. In the list of subscribers for Milton we again find Baskerville's friend, "Benjamin Franklin, Esquire, Philadelphia;" and also "Isaac Norris, Esq., Speaker of the Assembly of Pennsylvania." There are subscribers from Leipsic, Dublin, Berlin, etc., and it is interesting to note that the British bookseller subscribed for 159 copies out of 1113, the total list of subscribers. The first edition of this book was 1500 copies,

the second 700 on large paper, and it was reprinted three times in the next two years.

Hansard says: "This work will, in my opinion, bear a comparison, even to its advantage, with those subsequently executed by the first typographer of our age.... There is a clearness, a soberness, a softness, and at the same time a spirit, altogether harmonizing in Baskerville's book, that neither of the others, with which I am comparing it, can, I think, fairly claim."* Dibdin says: "These lovely impressions of Baskerville appeared twice in octavo, 1758 and 1760—and once in 4to. 1759. But the octavos have a quarto aspect. I find that a delicious copy bound in the morocco of the day, is priced at £3.10. I know of no *par-lour-reading* like that of Milton in one of the editions of Baskerville."†

The folio edition of the Bible, printed at Cambridge under the patronage of the university, was really Baskerville's *magnum opus*. It was the most ambitious of his undertakings, and I think one of the most artistic of his productions, but it was a financial failure. In his proposal for it he said: "The great expense, with which this Work will necessarily be attended, renders it not only imprudent, but absolutely impossible for the Editor to venture on it, without the assistance of a Subscription. And he is encouraged to hope, as he has already received the public approbation of his Labours, that they will continue to favour his ambition, and to enable him to make this one Work as correct, elegant, and perfect as the Importance of it demands. To this end he is determined to spare no Expense, no Care, nor Attention. He builds his Reputation upon the happy Execution

* *Hansard's Typographia*, page 311.

† *Dibdin's Library Companion*, page 716.