

1 **Inhuming and exhuming: John Baskerville's death, burial and post-mortem life**

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3

4 **Abstract**

5 Baskerville, with its well-considered design and elegant proportions is one of the
6 world's most widely used and influential typefaces. It was created by John Baskerville
7 (1707–75) of Birmingham, an eighteenth-century typographer, printer and
8 industrialist; an Enlightenment figure with a worldwide reputation who changed the
9 course of type design. Whilst printing historians have lauded Baskerville for his
10 contributions to the trade, he is more widely remembered for his unusual will,
11 unconventional burial, and extraordinary post-mortem life. It is a story which has been
12 retold over the course of 250 years by the local, national, and international press and
13 which has contributed to the making of Baskerville's erroneous reputation as an atheist.
14 This article surveys the evidence of Baskerville death and burial and reappraises the
15 facts surrounding his post-mortem activities in order to correct the misapprehensions
16 which surround Baskerville's beliefs and to reassess him as a deist rather than atheist.

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18

19 **Keywords**

20 atheist, Baskerville, Birmingham, burial, death, deist, internment, printer,
21 unconsecrated ground

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23

24 On Monday 29 December 1947, the *Radio Times* listed *Hic Jacet: the corpse in the*
25 *crescent* amongst the programmes to be broadcast that evening on the BBC Midlands
26 Home Service. The twenty-minute radio play was written by Neville Brandon Watts, an
27 English teacher at a boarding school near Cannock Chase with a particular interest in
28 Birmingham history.¹ The play's cast of nineteen actors were all drawn from the
29 recently formed BBC Radio Drama Company, and included Norman Painting as the
30 Reader.² Painting (1924–2009) later went on to play Phil Archer in the BBC radio

¹ J. Tittley, *Baskerville Society Newsletter*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Birmingham, 2018).

² 'The Radio Drama Company' in *The BBC* <bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1j94Sg0D452YpLFz2SLYLpd/the-radio-drama-company> (accessed 13 September 2021).

31 programme, *The Archers*.³ Although no recording of the broadcast survives, a copy of
32 the original script—heavily annotated, and decorated with sketches by Painting—is
33 archived in the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham.⁴ Billed as a
34 ‘macabre story’, *Hic Jacet*, as the script notes, tells the story of ‘one of Birmingham’s
35 most remarkable sons’, the printer John Baskerville (1707–75).⁵ The play, however, by-
36 passes Baskerville’s achievements as a writing master and stone carver, as a highly
37 successful manufacturer of Birmingham japanware, and the town’s High Bailiff.⁶ It
38 makes scant reference to Baskerville the creator of one the most historically important
39 typefaces, his role as printer to the University of Cambridge, or his masterpiece, the
40 Folio Bible (1763).⁷ The play also ignores his legacy as an inventor, entrepreneur and
41 Enlightenment figure.⁸ Rather than narrating Baskerville’s life, *Hic Jacet* recounts
42 Baskerville’s death.

43

44 Whilst printing historians have long lauded Baskerville’s typographic achievements,
45 popular interest in Baskerville has focused on his unusual will, curious burial, and
46 remarkable post-mortem life. His corpse has, allegedly, been moved more times than
47 any other, and Baskerville’s many inhumations and exhumations have earned him the
48 memorable, if inaccurate, soubriquet ‘thrice buried printer’.⁹ It is a saga which has
49 piqued the interest of a curious public for nearly 250 years, an interest that has been
50 fanned with some frequency—and much embellishment—by the press. Brandon
51 Watts’s drama draws on many of these myths and half-truths. It is a humorous and
52 diverting play, which provided ‘sensational’ entertainment for family audiences when it
53 was first broadcast in 1948 and was enjoyed once more in 2013 when it was performed,

³ G. Reynolds, ‘Painting, Norman George’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*,
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/102087>> (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁴ Cadbury Research Library [CRL], MS200.10.3.7.1; ‘Norman Painting Archive’, in *Archives Hub*,
<<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb150-ms200>> (accessed 13 September 2021).

⁵ C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick eds., *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); J. Mosley, ‘Baskerville, John’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*,
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/1624>> (accessed 17 September 2021).

⁶ E. Clayton, ‘John Baskerville the Writing Master: Calligraphy and Type in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’ in *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment*, ed. by C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017) pp. 113–30; Y. Jones, ‘John Baskerville: Japanner of Tea Trays and other Household Goods’ in *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment*, ed. by C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017) pp. 71–86.

⁷ J. Dreyfus, ‘John Baskerville’s Books’, *Book Collector*, vol. 8. (London, 1959) p. 185.

⁸ M. Dick, ‘The Topographies of a Typographer: Mapping John Baskerville since the Eighteenth Century’, in *John Baskerville: art and industry of the Enlightenment*, ed. by C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017) pp. 9–24.

⁹ B. Walker, *The Resting Places of the Remains of John Baskerville: The Thrice-Buried Printer*, (Birmingham: Birmingham School of Printing, 1944).

54 live, at the opening of the new Library of Birmingham. But whilst *Hic Jacet* may make
55 good drama, it has also contributed to the perpetuation of much misinformation about
56 Baskerville both in life and death.

57

58 This article considers the evidence of Baskerville's death, burial, and multiple
59 exhumations in order to separate the man from the misinformation. A careful reading of
60 Baskerville's last will and testament offers insights into his character, private world,
61 relationships, and guiding beliefs. Consideration of the evidence around Baskerville's
62 funeral and burial provides an understanding of how he related to the world, his
63 position within society and how he wished to be remembered in perpetuity. A retelling
64 of the story behind Baskerville's subsequent exhumations and inhumations offers an
65 opportunity to reappraise events, place them in context and separate fact from fiction.
66 Finally, the article looks at the way in which the press has portrayed Baskerville's death
67 and burial and how 'envious historians and ignorant tradition' have 'defaced his
68 memory' and 'added flippancy' to the circumstances of his death which 'undiscerning
69 writers continue to relate'.¹⁰

70

71 **Last will and testament**

72 On Wednesday 6 January 1773, John Baskerville composed his will. There is nothing to
73 suggest that he was, as Brandon Watts writes, 'near death' at the time. Indeed, the two
74 years between writing his will and his death in January 1775 were 'one of the busiest
75 periods of Baskerville's life'.¹¹ He maintained a vigorous programme of printing, issuing
76 eleven new volumes including Lucretius's *de Rerum Natura*; four editions of Ariosto's
77 *Orlando Furioso*; two editions of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*; two printings of Sallust &
78 *Florus's Histories*; an edition of *The Art of Angling*; and a magisterial volume of Hunter's
79 *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*. In addition, Baskerville was negotiating with the
80 Imprimerie Royale in Paris for the supply of his type, and had written to Benjamin
81 Franklin in America about his intention of 'enlarging [his] foundry'.¹² Not the actions of
82 a man contemplating death, or even retirement. That Baskerville drafted his will when

¹⁰ G. J. Holyoake, *Secular Review* (London: 8 September 1877) quoted in Straus & Dent p. 64. Howard, W. Scott. "Landscapes of memorialisation." *Studying cultural landscapes* (2003): 47-70.

¹¹ F. E. Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham: letterfounder and printer*, (London, 1971), p. 128.

¹² L. Jay, *Letters of the Famous 18th Century Printer, John Baskerville of Birmingham* (Birmingham: Birmingham School of Printing, 1932), p. 30.

83 he did was probably no more than the pragmatic undertaking of a man who valued his
84 friends and family and wished to safeguard his fortune for the benefit of their future.

85

86 Baskerville's will is important not simply because it details the distribution of his
87 wealth amongst those left behind. It is significant because it is one of only a handful of
88 extant documents penned by Baskerville and, at just over 1,500 words, it is also the
89 longest of his known compositions.¹³ Unlike his friend and associate, Matthew Boulton
90 (1728–1809), Baskerville left no archive and few artefacts relating to his commercial,
91 civic or private lives. As a consequence, the biographical facts of his life are sketchy and
92 based on fragmentary primary sources and unreliable secondary testimonies. Definitive
93 knowledge of the man is frustratingly sparse. Baskerville's will, which is both personal
94 and intimate as well as official and public, helps form an understanding of the man, his
95 ideologies and beliefs based on first-hand evidence. The will is also important because it
96 dispels some of the myths and misrepresentations of which Baskerville has long been a
97 victim; it presents the man in his own words, and in the way he wishes to be understood
98 by future generations.

99

100 After his death, Baskerville's will was published in both the British and foreign press,
101 and was met with astonishment and disapprobation by a scandalised public and
102 moralistic media. This was partly because the will contains forthright remarks by
103 Baskerville about his friends and family, and some rather unusual instructions for the
104 disposal of his body, but mainly because it presents Baskerville's unorthodox views on
105 religion and the Bible which were perceived as atheistic and therefore offensive. In
106 1788 *The Gentleman's Magazine* reproduced the document under the headline 'The
107 Singular Will of the late Mr Baskerville' but deemed it too sensitive to print in full,
108 tantalisingly deploying asterisks—with no explanation—in place of the offending
109 sentences.¹⁴ The nervousness of the press in printing a full version of the will continued
110 well in to the nineteenth century and neither John Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes* (1812),
111 John Chambers's *Biographical Illustrations of Worcestershire* (1820) nor William

¹³ Library of Birmingham [LoB], MS 39/7.79.

¹⁴ 'The Singular Will of the late Mr Baskerville' in *The Gentleman's Magazine* Vol, 58, Part 2, (London: 1788) pp. 677–9.

112 Fawley's *Epitaphiana* (1873) could bring themselves to present an unexpurgated
113 version of the document to their readers.¹⁵

114

115 As befitted his social status, Baskerville's last will and testament was proved on 9 March
116 1775 in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, the highest probate court in the country.¹⁶
117 It commences formally with the dispersal of his estate: 'First, I give, bequeath & devise
118 unto my executors hereafter named ...' around £12,560 (equivalent to £2,081,283.40) to
119 be distributed among family and friends, young and old.¹⁷ Baskerville was evidently
120 wealthy. An analysis of the beneficiaries named in his will would make an interesting
121 future study as they are revealing of Baskerville's connections, the intertwining of
122 Birmingham's leading families, and his position within these criss-crossing networks.
123 Whilst the fiscal aspects of Baskerville's will demonstrate his net worth, the goods and
124 chattels enumerated in the document shed light on the comforts and contents at Easy
125 Hill, his home on the edge of Birmingham. They offer a rare glimpse inside his private
126 world thereby providing an understanding of his lifestyle, material wealth, and the
127 possessions he regarded as significant. Baskerville made specific mention of his
128 'household furniture, plate and china' and certain household fixtures, 'particularly the
129 fire-place'. Installed at prodigious cost, and much in-vogue in the eighteenth century,
130 the fireplace along with 'the grate, fender and ... three leaden-figures', not only
131 indicates Baskerville's elevated social status and but also suggests his modern tastes in
132 household design. Baskerville was equally concerned with his garden. His friend,
133 William Hutton, referred to Easy Hill as a 'Little Eden',¹⁸ and a bill from James Gordon, a
134 London seeds-man, evidences the plants and seeds Baskerville used to establish his
135 'plantations of trees and shrubs of every kind'.¹⁹ In the eighteenth century no
136 fashionable estate was complete without an artificial grotto, the mention of which in
137 Baskerville's will demonstrates he was acquainted with the latest fashions in estate
138 design. Baskerville's garden beautified the place which was both his home and his

¹⁵ J. Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol 3 (London: 1812), pp. 455–58; J. Chambers, *Biographical Illustrations of Worcestershire* (Worcester: 1820), pp 375–77; W. Fawley, *Epitaphiana, Or, the Curiosities of Church-yard Literature* (1873), p. 56.

¹⁶ National Archives Catalogue, 'Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury', PROB 11/1005/296 <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D457848>> (accessed, 11 October 2021)

¹⁷ CPI Inflation Calculator, <<https://www.in2013dollars.com/UK-inflation>> (accessed 22 September 2021).

¹⁸ W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1795), p 90–94.

¹⁹ Birmingham Archives & Collections (BA&C), MS 3782/6/190/120, bill from James Gordon-MB, November 1766; E. Mitchell, 'Marigolds not Manufacturing: plants, print and commerce in eighteenth-century Birmingham', in *Pen, Print and Communication in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020) pp. 153–68.

139 workplace. Given this dual function, it is curious that Baskerville gives no instructions
140 for the disposal of either his japanning or printing manufactories. Although the latter
141 passed to Baskerville's wife, Sarah (1704–88), who continued to run the printing house
142 until she sold the machinery, types, and punches to Beaumarchais in 1779, it is unclear
143 what happened to the goods, tools and equipment associated with Baskerville's
144 japanning works.²⁰

145

146 Whilst Baskerville's will provides useful information about the distribution of his fiscal
147 and material wealth, the document becomes increasingly interesting once the legal
148 utterances fade and Baskerville's own voice comes to the fore as he speaks directly to
149 his beneficiaries. It is a highly personal section of the document—warm and
150 compassionate on the one hand, angry and pitiless on the other—as Baskerville veers
151 between making provision for those he loved and staying his hand against those who
152 grieved him. His generosity towards the children in the family is notable. He bequeathed
153 his nephew, John Townsend, a gold watch as 'a keepsake'; gave Isaac, the son of Thomas
154 Marston, just £10 'for pocket money' because 'if he behaves well' he will inherit a
155 fortune from his uncle; and Baskerville touchingly notes 'I must not forget my little
156 favourite', Sarah, the daughter of Ferdinand and Sarah De Meirre—his wife's
157 daughter—to whom he leaves £500 in trust.

158

159 Towards his adult beneficiaries, Baskerville is equally generous both with his language
160 and his pocket. During his lifetime, Baskerville notes, he gave his niece, Rebecca, and her
161 husband, Thomas Westley, a 'considerable sum'. However, because he observed with
162 pleasure that 'Providence had blest their endeavours' and because the Westley's had 'no
163 child nor chick' to inherit, Baskerville 'stayed [his] hand' so that he might assist those
164 whose want was greater. His desire to help those in need also included a bequest of
165 £500 to the Protestant Dissenting Charity School 'towards erecting a commodious
166 building' for the education and support of poor children of any religious denomination.
167 Baskerville an industrialist and materialist is also social, equitable and ethical in his
168 generosity. But whilst he rewards good behaviour, he also punishes transgressions.
169 When addressing those who crossed him in life, Baskerville's language turns bitter and

²⁰ J. Dreyfus, *The Survival of Baskerville's Punches*, (Cambridge: Privately Printed, 1949); Yvonne Jones, *Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware c.1740-1940*, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2012)

170 malevolent. John, Daniel and Josiah, the sons of Baskerville’s late friend Jonathan Ruston
171 [d. 1762], received less than they might have expected because Baskerville foresaw,
172 ‘they will endeavour to traduce my memory as they have already done my character’. A
173 reference, perhaps, to malicious reports of bad debts made against Baskerville which he
174 was forced to defend in the pages of the *Birmingham Gazette*.²¹ Martha Ryland [d.
175 1817]—wife of Baskerville’s friend, the industrialist John Ryland—was a victim of
176 Baskerville’s sharp tongue and blunt justice as her ‘unprovoked, petulant malice and
177 spleen and abusive treatment’ of him during his lifetime convinced him of ‘the rancour
178 of her heart’ and caused him to revoke an earlier decision to revise his lease in her
179 favour. Baskerville’s will, a public document published at home and abroad, ensured his
180 displeasure was made common knowledge and that Martha’s reputation was denigrated
181 in perpetuity. Not averse to ‘traducing’ the memory and character of others, Baskerville
182 could evidently give as good as he got. Clearly ‘a man of paradoxes’, Baskerville’s
183 treatment of his friends and family show him to be affectionate and judicious on the one
184 hand, but holding deep-seated personal animosities and great bitterness on the other.²²

185
186 It is notable that Baskerville left the largest proportion of his estate to women. Sarah,
187 his wife, business partner, and former housekeeper, was the major beneficiary
188 inheriting both money and property. An earlier trust had ensured Easy Hill for her ‘sole
189 use and benefit’, but Baskerville’s will made it ‘entirely her own’, thereby giving his wife
190 both autonomy and authority over the estate. His aforementioned ‘little favourite’,
191 Sarah de Meirre, was given a princely £500 for her ‘sole use and benefit’; and his niece,
192 Rebecca Westley, received £100 which was ‘entirely at her own disposal’ and beyond
193 the control or ‘intermeddling of her husband’ and that ‘her receipt alone’ was sufficient
194 discharge for the executors. By his will, Baskerville ensured his female beneficiaries
195 were financially secure and their prosperity was wholly independent from, and beyond
196 the reach of others—particularly men. It is also significant that the only charity
197 Baskerville chose to support, the Protestant Dissenting Charity School to which he left
198 £500, was specifically for girls who were entirely maintained by the school and
199 apprenticed on leaving.²³ Whilst it is not possible to draw absolute conclusions simply

²¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, (Birmingham: 9 February 1761).

²² T. Baines Reed, *A History of Old English Letter Foundries*, ed. A. F. Johnson, (London: 1952), p. 282.

²³ ‘Public Education: Schools’, in *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham*, ed. W. B. Stephens (London, 1964), pp. 501–48.

200 based on the evidence of the will, there is some suggestion that Baskerville may have
201 encouraged female autonomy in a world dominated by men and where the unequal
202 legal position of women and wives placed significant constraints upon them. It is
203 tempting to view him as an early feminist, a defender of the social and financial freedom
204 of women and a champion of their education. If this is the case, it is impossible to know
205 what prompted Baskerville's progressive position towards women, or how far his
206 enlightened attitudes extended, but his will certainly attempts to provide those women
207 closest to him with both independence and financial security.²⁴

208

209 The distribution of Baskerville's goods and chattels was reliant upon the express
210 condition 'that my wife, in concert with my Executors, do cause my body to be buried in
211 a conical building in my own premises, heretofore used as a mill.' To be buried at home,
212 and therefore in unconsecrated ground, was an unorthodox request and one which
213 Baskerville foresaw was likely to meet with opposition. To ensure compliance with his
214 wishes he therefore tied the inheritance of his legacies to the carrying out of the
215 instructions for his internment. To ensure his wishes were faithfully carried out,
216 Baskerville selected his Executors with care and rewarded them generously for their
217 troubles:

218 Lastly, I do hereby appoint my worthy friends, Mr Edward Palmer and Josiah
219 Ruston, my wife's brother, joint-Executors of this my will, in most perfect
220 confidence (as I know the integrity of their hearts) that they will, jointly and
221 cordially, execute this my most important trust committed to them with integrity
222 and candour; to each of which I leave six guineas [£1,136]²⁵ to buy a ring, which I
223 hope they will consider as a keepsake.

224 The execution of his uncommon internment was the 'most important' of Baskerville's
225 final wishes; his faith in the honesty, reliability and truthfulness of his Executors is
226 evident.

227

²⁴ K. O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009); Renu, 'Status of women in the eighteenth-century's English society', in *International Journal of Advanced Education and Research*, Volume 2, Issue 3, (2017), 153-54.

²⁵ UK Inflation Calculator, < <https://www.in2013dollars.com/UK-inflation> > (accessed 25 October 2021)

228 Baskerville was not alone in requesting an unusual burial. In eighteenth-century
229 England incidents of ‘deviant burials’—those which were either statistically uncommon
230 or different from the norm—were rare but notable, particularly in the second half of the
231 century. For example, John Jocelyn (1689–1741) wished to be interred in the circle of
232 jews in the Grand Avenue leading to his Hydehall estate in Essex, whilst Susanna
233 Carteret Webb (1711–56) instructed she was to be buried in a cave. Like Baskerville,
234 Henry Trigg (d. 1724) of Stevenage tied his inheritance to the disposal of his body when
235 he willed all his lands to his brother on the condition his body lay in the rafters of his
236 outhouse. As Claire Gittings has noted, ‘one fallacy that frequently features in accounts
237 of these burials, sometimes by contemporary as well as later writers, and which
238 negatively colours the folklore, is that if the deceased were buried in unconsecrated
239 ground, then they must have been atheists’.²⁶ It is certainly a myth which has been long
240 been attached to Baskerville, who, even during his life time, was frequently accused of
241 ‘revolting atheism.’ Mark Nobel referred to him as a ‘most profane wretch’;²⁷ John
242 Wilkes claimed ‘he was a terrible infidel’;²⁸ and John Chambers wrote that Baskerville
243 ‘unblushingly avowed not only his disbelief of, but his contempt for revealed religion,
244 and that in terms too gross for repetition.’²⁹ These, and other remarks, sealed
245 Baskerville’s reputation as an atheist, ‘gracious infidel’ or ‘kindly pagan’ a
246 misapprehension unintentionally reinforced by his will: a misreading of which persists
247 today.³⁰

248

249 Baskerville’s will makes it clear that his desire for an unconventional burial was a result
250 of neither caprice nor atheism but the logical conclusion of long-held, considered
251 opinions: ‘doubtless to many, [this] may appear a whim; perhaps it is so, but it is a whim
252 for many years resolved upon.’ Baskerville goes on to explain the basis for his decision:

253 I have a hearty contempt of all superstition, the farce of consecrated
254 ground, the Irish barbarism of ‘sure and certain hopes’ &c. as I also
255 consider Revelation, as it is called, exclusive of the scraps of morality
256 casually intermixed with it, to be the most impudent abuse of common

²⁶ Gittings, ‘Eccentric or Enlightened?’ Unusual burial and commemoration in England, 1689–1823’, *Mortality*, 12:4, (2007), p. 322-27

²⁷ M. Nobel, *A Biographical History of England*, (London; W. Richardson, 1806), pp. 361–2.

²⁸ Straus & Dent, *John Baskerville*, p. 63.

²⁹ J. Chambers, *Biographical Illustrations of Worcestershire*, (London: 1820).

³⁰ H. Evans, *John Baskerville: The Gracious Infidel*, (San Francisco: Peregrine Press, 1953).

257 sense which ever was invented to befool mankind. I expect some shrewd
258 remark will be made on this my declaration by the ignorant & bigoted
259 who are taught to believe that morality (by which I understand all the
260 duties a man owes to God and his fellow creatures) is not sufficient to
261 entitle him to divine favour without professing to believe as they call it
262 certain absurd doctrines & mysteries about which they have no more
263 conception than a horse. This morality alone I profess to have been my
264 religion and the rule of my actions, to which I appeal how far my
265 profession and practice have been consistent’.

266 Baskerville’s pronouncements on religion, his biblical criticisms, and his contempt of
267 needless superstition were the most controversial parts of his will. As Bennett noted
268 ‘the terms *revelation* and *consecration*, in theory orthodox eighteenth-century
269 interpretation, were to [Baskerville] unacceptable’.³¹ His views on ‘absurd doctrines &
270 mysteries’ are so forcefully articulated that they have not only exposed him to
271 accusations of atheism they have also detracted from his clearly expressed ideological
272 stance on God and morality. Morality—‘all the duties a man owes to God and his fellow
273 creatures’—is central to Baskerville’s world-view and religion, and is at the heart of his
274 obligation to both man and Divinity, the existence of the latter he certainly recognises. It
275 is a concept that Baskerville also presented in his *Vocabulary: or pocket dictionary*
276 (1765)—a volume which he certainly printed and possibly compiled—in which he
277 defines ‘morally’ as ‘according to the dictates of natural reason’ and which is reached
278 through observation, logic, and sound judgment.³² It is an epistemological viewpoint by
279 which Baskerville rejects those beliefs which have simply been formed on the basis of
280 tradition, revelation, or dogma and instead argues reason and reflection are sufficient to
281 prove the existence of a Supreme Being, in which he clearly believes. It is a perspective
282 that marks him as a free-thinking deist, but not an atheist.

283

284 There is a didactic fervour to Baskerville’s ‘religion’ that drove him to continue
285 preaching it beyond the grave. His belief was so important to him that it was reified in

³¹ W. Bennett, *John Baskerville, the Birmingham Printer*, (Birmingham: 1937), i, 9.

³² L. Mugglestone, ‘Identity, Enigma, Assemblage: John Baskerville’s *Vocabulary, or Pocket Dictionary*’ in *Pen, Print and Communication in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by C. Archer-Parré, M. Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020) pp. 141–52.

286 his self-penned epitaph, and he quite literally made his abstract ideas concrete by
287 having them inscribed on the ‘conical building’ which served as his burial place:

288 Stranger —
289 Beneath this Cone in Unconsecrated Ground
290 A Friend to the Liberties of mankind Directed his Body to be Inhum’d
291 May the Example Contribute to Emancipate thy Mind
292 From the Idle Fears of Superstition
293 And the Wicked arts of Priesthood.

294 It was an earthly memorial which not only challenged the concept of burial on
295 consecrated ground and defied the authority of the Church and its associated rites, but
296 it also advocated freedom of choice and self-determination of which Baskerville, as he
297 suggests, was an exemplar. It was a brave stance, as Pardoe writes Baskerville ‘not only
298 had an independent mind but was capable of coming to a carefully thought-out set of
299 beliefs and of then continuing to hold them in the face of what must have been
300 considerable unpopularity’.³³ The tenacity with which he followed his religion and
301 vocalised his beliefs certainly demonstrated a strength of character for which ‘one can
302 only admire him.’³⁴

303
304

305 **Death and internment**

306 When *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* published notice of Baskerville’s death on Monday 23
307 January 1775 the announcement was concise:

308 Died. On Monday last, at Easy Hill in this Town, Mr John Baskerville; whose
309 Memory will be perpetuated, by the Beauty and Elegance of his Printing, which
310 he carried to a very great Perfection.

311 Whilst the announcement tells nothing of the cause of his death or arrangements for his
312 funeral, it does, as Malcolm Dick notes, ‘establish the leitmotif of Baskerville’s
313 posthumous reputation, namely the excellence of his printing’ about which there can be
314 little doubt.³⁵ It raises, however, an uncertainty as to the exact date of Baskerville’s
315 death. Whilst *Aris* states the printer died ‘on Monday last’—that is 16 January 1775—his
316 various biographers almost unanimously date his death to Sunday 8 January. Pardoe

³³ F. E. Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham Letter-Founder & Printer*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1975), 122–23.

³⁴ Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, 122–23.

³⁵ Dick, ‘The Topographies of a Typographer’, p. 10.

317 suggests the reason for this discrepancy maybe attributed to an earlier notice which
318 appeared in *Aris's* on 9 January, and which announced that 'Early Yesterday Morning
319 died in an Apoplectic Fit, Mr Samuel Aris, Printer of this paper'. The deaths of the two
320 Birmingham printers, Pardoe suggests, may have become conflated in the minds of
321 subsequent historians and, because Baskerville was interred on his own property, there
322 are no associated burial records to confirm either the date of his demise or that of his
323 internment.³⁶

324

325 Just as the date of Baskerville's death is unsure, so is the form of his funeral. Scholarly
326 research on eighteenth-century English funerals is limited and therefore there is little
327 context against which to surmise the events of Baskerville's own internment. Most
328 people were buried by Anglican clergy using the burial service of the *Book of Common*
329 *Prayer* and, at least for the wealthy, the sermon played an important role in the
330 proceedings. The majority of the dead were interred in consecrated ground in a
331 churchyard and laid to rest in coffins, the production of which had become ubiquitous
332 during the eighteenth century. The newly emerging trade of undertaking ensured the
333 better off were provided with a range of goods necessary for a decent funeral such as
334 shrouds, hearses, rings, and mourning clothes.³⁷ Not everyone accepted the conventions
335 of burial or the commercial trappings introduced by the undertakers, rejecting
336 established Christian rituals in favour of a more individual approach to death and
337 internment. During the second half of the eighteenth-century highly personalised
338 funerals pre-planned by those with time and money at their disposal became significant,
339 albeit rare, events: Baskerville's internment is one such bespoke burial.

340

341 Baskerville's funeral was held on private land. It is not known, therefore, when his
342 interment took place, who mourned at his grave, who officiated over the occasion, or
343 what kind of service, if any, was performed. However, it was probably an
344 unconventional funeral befitting his free-thinking attitudes and deist beliefs. He would
345 certainly have eschewed the clergy and, despite having printed six editions of the *Book*
346 *of Common Prayer*, it is unlikely to have been used to conduct any ceremony he may
347 have had. Whilst the manner of his funeral is open to speculation, the place of

³⁶ Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, 132–33.

³⁷ C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*, (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984; R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480–1750*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

348 Baskerville's internment is clear: his 'own premises' at Easy Hill. There were several
349 reasons Baskerville chose to be buried on his own property rather than at St Martins,
350 the parish church where he had married eleven years earlier, or St Philips where his
351 wife was later buried, or even one of Birmingham's unconsecrated, non-conformist,
352 burial grounds. Firstly, his deist persuasions and his 'hearty contempt of all superstition
353 [and] the farce of a consecrated ground' meant a home-burial was a logical conclusion
354 to his ideological stance, an assertion of his independence from society's traditions, and
355 his freedom from both civic and religious authority. Secondly, it was explicit evidence of
356 his wealth and elevated social status. In the eighteenth century, a fashion for
357 mausoleum building emerged amongst the gentry whose bodies were interred in
358 unconsecrated ground on their own estates. Baskerville, although not a member of
359 gentry, was sufficiently prosperous to be interred at home, if not in a mausoleum, then a
360 pre-existing 'conical building' retrofitted specifically for the purpose. Thirdly,
361 Baskerville's internment in his beloved garden echoed a wider eighteenth-century
362 interest in landscape and the natural world. Baskerville's desire to spend eternity in his
363 self-made 'Little Eden' with its fine house and garden populated with 'trees and shrubs
364 of every kind' chimes with the era's concern for place, space, and the natural world.

365
366 As already noted, Baskerville's will states he was to be placed in a specially prepared
367 vault in 'a conical building in [his] own premises'. Two years before his death the
368 conical building had been 'raised higher' to accommodate the vault and was 'painted'.
369 Whether Baskerville was buried 'in [the] conical building'—that is above ground—as
370 his will indicates, or 'beneath [the] cone'—that is underground—as suggested by his
371 epitaph, is uncertain. However, a photograph in the Library of Birmingham plainly
372 shows his coffin was made of lead.³⁸ The lead would have been necessary if Baskerville's
373 interment took place above ground as the soft metal would have provided an airtight
374 seal preventing the body from premature decay, and kept death's effluence at bay. The
375 coffin originally had an outer casing made of wood and matting was used to separate
376 the body from the lead.³⁹ Its construction would have required the services of both a
377 plumber and a carpenter of which Birmingham had many, although it is not known who

³⁸ LoB, MS 1666/2.

³⁹ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, (Birmingham: 13 April 1893).

378 was responsible for its production.⁴⁰ It is known, however, that Baskerville's body was
379 dressed in a shroud, reliable evidence for which exists in the Library of Birmingham
380 where there is a yellow rosette made of linen cut from the shroud by Dr George Edward
381 Male—the father of English medical jurisprudence—when Baskerville's body was put
382 on public display in 1821.⁴¹ Burial in a shroud typically meant the corpse was without
383 personal clothes. Therefore, evidence of the shroud may contradict claims, originally
384 made by T. E. Ryland, that Baskerville was buried in his 'court clothes' and in 'shoes
385 with very large buckles.'⁴² In life Baskerville was certainly a 'fond of shew' but in death,
386 it seems, he chose a simpler couture.⁴³ A final piece of evidence of Baskerville's burial
387 emerged once again in 1821 when a branch of laurel was found on his chest alongside
388 scatterings of bay and other leaves.⁴⁴ Whether placed inside the shroud to disguise the
389 smell of the decomposition, or whether they formed part of the wreath which may had
390 dressed the coffin, it is impossible to know. The use of herbs often had superstitious
391 connotations attached to them, but given Baskerville's antipathy toward the irrational,
392 they were unlikely to have any significance beyond the practical.

393

394 Baskerville had the time, money and inclination to pre-plan his burial, funeral and
395 lasting memorial. Indications as to the form his funeral might have taken can be
396 surmised from his will, in conjunction with observations made on his coffin and corpse
397 during subsequent exhumations. Piecing together the evidence has enabled some
398 informed assumptions about the event. But whatever form it took it is certain that the
399 funeral bore all the lively marks of John Baskerville, and that 'whatever else [it] was [it]
400 was not commonplace.'⁴⁵

401

402

403 **Inhuming and Exhuming**

404 When Baskerville was laid to rest in January 1775 it was, presumably, with the
405 expectation that he would remain at Easy Hill at least for the foreseeable future, if not in
406 perpetuity. His resting place, with its epitaph explicitly addressing 'Strangers', was

⁴⁰ N. Mihailovic, *The Dead in English Urban Society 1689–1840*, (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2011) p. 47.

⁴¹ LoB, MS 897; Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, 150–51.

⁴² *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, (Birmingham: 13 April 1893).

⁴³ Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, pp. 90–94.

⁴⁴ J. A. Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life: or A Chronical of Local Events from 1741 to 1841* Vol 2, (Birmingham: 1868) pp. 358–59.

⁴⁵ Talbot Baines Reed, *Old English Letter Foundries* (London: Elliot Stock, 1887) pp. 168–87.

407 intended as a memorial where both current and future generations might pay their
408 respects to England's preeminent printer and Birmingham's 'premier deist'.⁴⁶ That
409 Baskerville was exhumed just forty-six years after his death, and moved on a total of
410 eight occasions, could not have been predicted. It is a story that has been related by all
411 Baskerville's biographers—Strauss & Dent, Benton, Bennett, and Pardoe—
412 sensationalised by the press, and dramatized by the BBC. Whilst the story has been told
413 with varying degrees of historical accuracy mixed with theatrical embellishment, there
414 has been little reflection on the facts of the tale or what it tells us about Baskerville, his
415 legacy, and ways in which he has been remembered.

416

417 When Sarah Baskerville died in March 1788, the Easy Hill estate was auctioned by her
418 executors and purchased by the freeholder John Ryland [1726–1814], who made it his
419 home. The fate of Baskerville's 'conical building', however, is unclear. Demidowicz
420 writes that Ryland reconfigured the main house but demolished the 'out offices'.⁴⁷
421 Langford too suggests that 'soon after Mr Ryland became the possessor of the property,
422 the mausoleum ... was taken down'. Straus & Dent, however, claim that Ryland 'did not
423 disturb the mound under which the printer's body lay', a view repeated by Benton.⁴⁸ In
424 1791, Easy Hill was attacked by a mob in the Priestly Riots and the house was engulfed
425 in fire.⁴⁹ The extent of the damage can be seen in the etching *Views of the Ruins of the*
426 *Principal Houses Destroyed During the Riots at Birmingham*, and an 1805 map of the
427 town 'appears to only mark the house'.⁵⁰ In 1810, Ryland sold Easy Hill to Thomas
428 Gibson, a local ironmonger, and in 1811 work commenced on the development of a
429 series of canal wharves on what had been the Easy Hill estate; construction was
430 completed in 1817. Pardoe suggests the 'conical building' was demolished during this
431 time.⁵¹ It is unclear exactly when during all the reconfiguring, rioting, and redeveloping
432 the conical building was demolished, but in December 1820, 'some workmen who were
433 employed in getting gravel, discovered [Baskerville's] leaden coffin' but 'it was

⁴⁶ J. Holyoake, *Secular Review*, 8 September 1877.

⁴⁷ G. Demidowicz, 'Place, Home and Workplace', pp. 42–69.

⁴⁸ J. A. Langford, *A Century of Birmingham Life*, Vol II, (London: Simkin, Marshall, 1868), pp. 358–9; Straus & Dent, *John Baskerville*, p. 135. J. H. Benton, *John Baskerville, Type-founder and Printer 1706–1775*, (Boston: Privately Printed, 1914) p. 61.

⁴⁹ 'Explaining the Priestly Riots', in *Revolutionary Players*, <<https://www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk/explaining-the-priestley-riots/>> (accessed 3 October 2021).

⁵⁰ P. H. Witton, *Views of the ruins of the principal houses destroyed during the riots at Birmingham* (London: Printed for J. Johnson), 1791 [1792]; Demidowicz, 'Place, Home and Workplace' p. 67.

⁵¹ Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, p. 148.

434 immediately covered up' implying that at some point Baskerville had been placed
435 underground.⁵²

436

437 In May 1821 further work on the canal wharf necessitated the disinterment of
438 Baskerville's coffin which was then stored in Messrs Gibson & Sons ironmongery
439 warehouse in Cambridge Street. Eight years later, in August 1829, it was transferred to
440 John Marston's plumbing and glazing shop in Monmouth Street—a branch of the
441 Marston family having been beneficiaries of Baskerville's will. Between 1821 and 1829
442 the coffin was opened on various occasions for inspection and it is alleged that Gibson
443 charge 6d a head to see the body.⁵³ Langford, who viewed the body whilst it lay at
444 Gibson's, provides one of the earliest descriptions of the corpse, which was 'in a singular
445 state of preservation.'⁵⁴ He noted the body was 'wrapt in a linen shroud, which was very
446 perfect and white'. The shroud must have been at least partially removed to enable
447 Langford to produce his observations. Firstly, he offers a visual description of the body:
448 'The skin on the face was dry but perfect. The eyes were gone, but the eyebrows,
449 eyelashes, lips and teeth remained. The skin on the abdomen and body generally was in
450 the same state with that of the face.' Secondly, he uses his olfactory senses to describe
451 the 'exceedingly offensive and oppressive effluvia, strongly resembling cheese' which
452 arose from the body. Finally, Langford considers the body's remarkable state of
453 preservation—which many believed to have been embalmed—and concludes, 'the
454 putrefaction process must have been arrested by the leaden coffin having been sealed
455 hermetically, and thus the access of air, which modern discoveries have ascertained is
456 essential to putrefaction, was prevented.' Langford provides a factual, clinical account of
457 Baskerville's corpse based on sight, smell, and science in order to offer a forensic
458 understanding of the body and he supports his post-mortem observations with
459 reference to 'modern discoveries'.⁵⁵

460

461 Whilst nineteenth-century science provided quantifiable observations on Baskerville's
462 remains, the arts were able to visualise that which science could only enumerate. In
463 1829, nineteen-year-old Thomas Underwood (1810–72)—later to become

⁵² 'Disinterment of Mr Baskerville', *Birmingham Gazette*, (Birmingham: 28 May 1821).

⁵³ Bennett: II, pp. 77–8.

⁵⁴ Langford: II, pp. 358–9.

⁵⁵ *Empire of the Senses: the sensual cultural reader*, ed. David Howes (London: Routledge) 2005.

464 Birmingham's most famous lithographic artist—viewed the body as it lay at Marston's
465 and produced a pencil drawing which 'shows correctly what I saw of the remains'.⁵⁶ The
466 sketch is housed in the Library of Birmingham and is accompanied by the hand-written
467 legend 'Relic of Mr John Baskerville taken Augt 15, 1829'.⁵⁷ It illustrates Baskerville in
468 his coffin with his shroud pulled back around him, and whilst his teeth appear intact the
469 body demonstrates a greater degree of decomposition than suggested in Langford's
470 earlier description. Underwood evidently felt privileged to portray the man he regarded
471 as 'an artist in every sense of the word and will ever deservedly be famous as one of the
472 worthies of our town, who spread its fame the wide world over'.⁵⁸ It is fitting that
473 Birmingham's foremost lithographic artist was able to give visual form to the remains of
474 Birmingham's most famous typographic artist.

475

476 Baskerville's remains resided only briefly at Marston's shop before they were moved
477 once again. Over the ensuing seventy years there was much speculation as to
478 whereabouts of the body. In 1829 *The Birmingham Journal* stated the corpse had been
479 relocated to 'a piece of ground adjoining Cradley Chapel, the property of a branch of the
480 Baskerville family'; the story was repeated in Nichols's *Illustrations of the Literary*
481 *History of the Eighteenth Century* (1858).⁵⁹ In *Notes & Queries* (1851) however, William
482 Cornish, the Birmingham publisher and book seller, states 'the body of the eminent
483 printer now reposes, as it has for some years, in the vault of Christ Church in our
484 town.'⁶⁰ Birmingham, it appears, had mislaid Baskerville. Not so difficult to do in the
485 eighteenth century when such matters were not tightly regulated, deaths went
486 unregistered, the disposal of bodies was unregulated, and there were no acts governing
487 public health.

488

489 At a lecture delivered in the town in 1892, the typographic historian Talbot Baines Reed
490 (1852–93) suggested the confusion over Baskerville's resting place should be
491 investigated. In response, the churchwardens at Christ Church examined the burial
492 records which revealed although there were 136 vaults only 135 burials had been

⁵⁶ 'Thomas Underwood' in *British Book Trade Index*, < <http://bbti.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/details/?traderid=71268>> (accessed 19 October 2021).

⁵⁷ LoB, MS 897.

⁵⁸ Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, p. 150.

⁵⁹ *The Birmingham Journal*, (Birmingham: September 1829); J. Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century* Vol VIII, (London: Printed by and for J.B. Nichols and Son, 1858), p. 458.

⁶⁰ *Notes & Queries* 1st Series, Vol IV, (London: George Bell, 1851), p. 211

493 registered. On 12 April 1893 ‘under pressure from a number of local interested people’,
494 the vault was opened, the coffin was removed and its seal was broken in the presence of
495 twenty-four concerned observers.⁶¹ The magnitude of the occasion ensured the
496 presence of Birmingham’s great and the good including those with civic
497 responsibilities—Edward Lawley Parker (Mayor), W. S. Till (City Surveyor), Dr Oliver
498 Pemberton (Coroner) and Joseph Farndale (Chief of Police); members of the medical
499 profession—Dr Alfred Hill (Medical Officer for Health), Dr Bostock Hill (Professor of
500 Toxicology), Prof Bertram Windle (Professor of Anatomy and Anthropology);
501 antiquarians and historians—Sam Timmins (Shakespearian Scholar), Joseph Hill
502 (author and editor) Robert Kirkup Dent (author); and representatives of Christ
503 Church—Canon Wilcox (Vicar) and churchwardens past and present.⁶² The corpse was
504 examined and confirmed to be that of Baskerville. Underwood’s sketches were used for
505 identification and Sam Timmins verified that the remains ‘answer[ed] in every
506 description to portraits in his possession’. Further evidence included Baskerville’s name
507 which was soldered on the side of the lead coffin in printing types—not Baskerville’s
508 own—above which was written in chalk ‘Died 1775’ and below ‘Removed in 1829’.
509 After photographs of the coffin were taken and rubbings of the type were made,
510 Baskerville was returned to his vault and a tablet with the inscription ‘in these
511 catacombs rest the remains of John Baskerville the famous printer’ was placed on the
512 outside walls of the Church.

513

514 The discovery of Baskerville’s remains caused a sensation in Birmingham and outrage
515 amongst some Members of Parliament, with suggestions that the disinterment was an
516 offence in law. On 14 April 1893, G. C. T. Hartley, the member for North Islington,
517 brought the case before parliament and asked the Home Secretary, Herbert Asquith, ‘by
518 whose authority the grave of John Baskerville was opened and for what purpose, and
519 whether such practices would be prohibited in the future.’⁶³ He referred to the Burials
520 Act Amendment Act of 1857 which stated ‘it shall not be lawful to remove the body or
521 the remains of anybody which may have been interred in any place of burial.’⁶⁴ The
522 objection was over-ruled because the removal of the body was undertaken simply to

⁶¹ Pardoe, *John Baskerville*, p. 152.

⁶² *Birmingham Daily Argus* (Birmingham: 12 April 1893)

⁶³ *Hansard*, UK Parliament HC Deb 14 April 1893 vol 11 c325, <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1893-04-14/debates/a6f24495-f747-4dc9-9864-98ff999be8b0/Questions>> (accessed 25 October 2021)

⁶⁴ *Burial Act 1857*, <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/20-21/81>> (accessed 25 October 2021)

523 confirm its identity and it was reinterred almost immediately. It was not, however, to be
524 Baskerville's final internment. In 1897, authorisation was given for the demolition of
525 Christ Church and the bodies in the Catacombs were removed. Baskerville's body was
526 taken to the Church of England cemetery, at Warstone Lane, and laid in a vault beneath
527 the chapel. At the entrance to the vault was placed the tablet from the wall of Christ
528 Church, with the date of its removal added 'February 26, 1898'. Not everyone has been
529 happy with Baskerville's resting place. In 1963, a petition was presented by Councillor
530 John Silk to Birmingham City Council requesting Baskerville's remains be removed from
531 Warstone Lane to unhallowed ground stating 'it is unfortunate that one of our greatest
532 citizens has had his dearest wishes deliberately flouted.' The petition was unsuccessful,
533 and Baskerville continues to rest in Warstone Lane cemetery in the consecrated ground
534 he was so anxious to avoid.

535

536

537 **Media and Memory**

538 Baskerville has undoubtedly had a remarkable post-mortem life. Whilst 'we cannot say
539 with assurance that the last chapter has been written' there are certainly many column
540 inches—both contemporaneous and retrospective—which reflect on his multiple
541 inhumations and exhumations.⁶⁵ Over the course of nearly two-and-a-half centuries the
542 story has progressively become more dramatic and fanciful and details have been added
543 with each retelling. Whilst the press reports may be factually unreliable, they are,
544 however, useful in mapping the manner in which Baskerville has been portrayed, in
545 reflecting society's changing attitudes toward his death and its approaches to his
546 memorialisation.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, (Birmingham: 13 April 1893).

⁶⁶ See for example: 'The body of John Baskerville, printer,' *The Bookworm*. London: Elliot Stock, 1893. 167–8; 'The disinterment of Baskerville: an offence against the law,' *Birmingham Weekly Post*. Birmingham: 15 April, 1893; 'Discovery of Baskerville's bones: in the catacombs: a long to be remembered function,' *Daily Argus*. Birmingham: 12 April, 1893; 'Baskerville's burial place: the mystery solved,' *Birmingham Daily Gazette*. Birmingham: 13 April, 1893; 'The grave of John Baskerville,' *Times*. London: 18 April 1893; 'Disinterment of Mr Baskerville,' *Times*. London: 26 May 1821; 'Intelligence from various part of the country: the disinterment of Mr Baskerville,' *Gentleman's Magazine*. London: June 1821; 'Baskerville: re-buried in Cradley Chapel,' *Worcester Herald*. Worcester: 1829; 'John Baskerville's shroud: Relic of the Birmingham printer discovered: the wanderings of a coffin,' *Birmingham Mail*. Birmingham: 22 June 1912; 'John Baskerville's career in life and death: an amazing exhumation,' *Sunday Mercury*. Birmingham: 7 July 1935; 'In the catacombs,' *Birmingham Daily Gazette*. Birmingham, 21 May 1936; 'Baskerville tombs,' *Birmingham Post*. Birmingham: 18 July 1938; 'Baskerville tombs,' *Birmingham Post*. Birmingham: 21 July 1938; 'Baskerville tombs,' *Birmingham Post*. Birmingham: 14 July 1938; 'The two-penny peep: Baskerville,' *Sunday Mercury*. Birmingham: 29 November 1939; 'A Baskerville grave,' *Birmingham Mail*. Birmingham: 19 August 1946; 'Petition presented for printer's reburial,' *Times*. London: 13 March 1963; 'Move Baskerville remains' plea,' *Birmingham Post*. Birmingham: 8 March 1963; 'Printer's reburial demanded,' *Times*. London: 9 March 1963.

547

548 Baskerville has generally been presented with pride by the local press, which has
549 lauded his achievements as a printer and dignified him with terms such as ‘a great
550 Birmingham Genius’ and ‘one of Birmingham’s most celebrated worthies’. However,
551 these appellations have also been tempered by both sensational and derisive
552 journalism, and half-truths have usurped dependable reporting of his death and burial.
553 Whilst early commentators present Baskerville’s sojourn at Gibson’s warehouse in a
554 forensically factual manner, subsequent accounts sensationalise the story for the
555 benefit of a popular readership. For example, Langford claims that Baskerville’s corpse
556 was ‘in a singular state of preservation,’ but later writers use more evocative language
557 and present their readers with a ‘crumbling body’ and ‘mouldering bones’, and, to add
558 further colour to the story, Baskerville’s corpse is frequently—and erroneously—
559 described as ‘having been buried upright’.⁶⁷ Early reports suggest Gibson allowed some
560 visitors to view the body for ‘two pence a-piece’—others claim it was 6d or even 1
561 Guinea. Subsequent editorials inflate the tale still further claiming ‘all Birmingham was
562 waiting patiently’ to see Baskerville in his coffin, and that ‘people came in their
563 thousands to gawp’. To add to the tale of horror, the papers claim that some people fell
564 ill and died as a consequence of viewing the body, overcome by its odour. The
565 newspapers quickly exchanged Baskerville’s reputation as ‘the greatest printer that
566 Britain has ever had’ for a popular, commercial tale of Baskerville the crumbling corpse,
567 the subject of tawdry voyeurism, and with the vengeful hand of a dead man.⁶⁸

568

569 Baskerville’s removal to Christ Church in 1829 was largely due to the good auspices of
570 George Baker, solicitor, churchwarden and the owner of vault 521 in which Baskerville
571 was interred. The clandestine nature of the entombment ignited the imagination of the
572 press which took every opportunity to further embellish the tale. Billed as the ‘Strangest
573 drama in Birmingham’s history’ the local papers carried the story with increasingly
574 colourful descriptions of ‘body snatching’ and an ‘eerie’ midnight procession to move
575 the coffin.⁶⁹ When vault 521 was opened in 1893 to verify the body, the newspapers
576 covered the event in detail. Once again, the illegal nature of the occasion presented the

⁶⁷ Langford: II, pp, 358–9.

⁶⁸ Pardo, *John Baskerville*, cover text.

⁶⁹ *Birmingham Weekly Post*, (Birmingham: 2 April 1932).

577 press with a golden opportunity to produce some highly dramatic and colourful, if
578 fictional, editorials:

579 When the company had assembled within the gloomy chamber, a couple of
580 workmen, by the light of some oil lamps served to make the scene more-uncanny
581 ... the picture was indeed a weird one, the anxious faces gathered round being
582 scarcely discernible and the lamps' rays directed at full force upon the mouth of
583 the tomb adding to the intensity of the darkness around.⁷⁰

584 Drama and mystery were often interlaced with passing scientific comments:

585 Cannon Wilcox stood guard over the remains, flushing with nervousness when
586 the doctors gathered round in merely scientific mood. Dr Windle ... divested the
587 skull of a filet, in order to facilitate craniological scrutiny.⁷¹

588 In the same article, Dr Windle, Professor of Anatomy and Anthropology at Mason
589 Science College—later the University of Birmingham medical school—remarked the
590 corpse had a large skull and allegedly concluded this indicated 'a well-developed mental
591 faculty'. Whatever happened to his 'craniological scrutiny' of the 'filet' is unknown, but a
592 search of his many authored volumes and articles might be revealing.

593

594 Untangling the facts from the fiction of Baskerville's death, burial and post-mortem life
595 is difficult. The greater the time lapse between his death and the newspaper
596 commentaries, the greater the liberties taken with the story; and the more remote death
597 became from society, so the reports became commensurately more alarming and prone
598 to sensationalism and exaggeration. Across the decades, misunderstandings about
599 Baskerville's religious beliefs increased and proliferated, with wry comments that the
600 printer of the world's greatest Bible was the town's most famous atheist. During the
601 1930s, in particular, there was a flurry of such articles in the Birmingham press, as
602 interest in Baskerville was revived by a series of publications issued by the Birmingham
603 School of Printing. One particularly derisive retelling of Baskerville's tale suggested
604 'scores of thousands took their place in a queue' to view his body, not because he was
605 one of England's greatest printers, but because the clergy of the day claimed Baskerville
606 was 'an atheist, the very child of the devil' and so 'Birmingham formed up in a queue
607 and shuffled down Monmouth-street to gaze its fill on this limb—this very dead limb—

⁷⁰ *Birmingham daily Gazette*, (*Birmingham*: 13 April 1893).

⁷¹ *Birmingham Weekly Post*, 15 April 1893.

608 of Satan'. As a colourful local character who held unorthodox religious views and whose
609 body was exhumed and inhumed many times, it is hardly surprising that myths, largely
610 generated by the press, grew up around him.

611

612 Baskerville's self-curated memorialisation—expressed in print in his will, carved in
613 stone on his mausoleum—was not intended to reference the past, as is the case for most
614 memorials, instead he aimed to create a forward-looking message by which he would be
615 understood by future generations. Despite Baskerville's careful planning, how he is
616 remembered and comprehended has been appropriated others—friends and family,
617 historians, the Church, the medical profession, artists, poets and playwrights, the press,
618 and the city council—all of whom have contributed to and shaped the collective
619 memory of the man. Whilst these stories may not have tainted Baskerville's reputation
620 as printer, the reports have muddled Baskerville's post-mortem biography, generated
621 much hard-to-eradicate misinformation, obscured the message he wished to bequeath
622 to future generations, and eclipsed the way in which he wished to be remembered.
623 By retelling Baskerville's post-mortem story, examining the evidence of his will, by
624 revisiting the events surrounding his inhumations and exhumations and reappraising
625 the media coverage of his death it has been possible to not only recover Baskerville's
626 message for the future but to also understand who was referencing his past and how
627 and why they were undermining his message. It is an approach which may be applied to
628 post-mortem reputations of others and by doing so the memory and memorialisation of
629 individuals can help us shape our understanding of wider issues such as identity,
630 ideology, and influence.

631

632 **Afterword**

633 In his 'Preface' to *Paradise Lost* which he printed in 1758, Baskerville referred to the
634 many books he produced as 'performances', that is, they were the 'completion of
635 something designed; the execution of something promised.'⁷² Baskerville's death was
636 also a performance, one which began with the composition of his will in 1773 and was
637 to have concluded with his internment in 1775. The will serves as a prologue to
638 Baskerville's death, an event which he carefully designed and for which he made
639 judicious plans for its production. The will introduces the *dramatis personae*, the themes

⁷² S. Johnston, *Dictionary*, < <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php> > (online, 27 October 2021).

640 of the performance, the props required, and the directions under which the drama was
641 to unfold. Baskerville's will is carefully crafted and consciously theatrical in both its
642 language and structure, and it addresses not only its immediate audience but also
643 audiences far into an unknown future. Baskerville, aware that his will would be
644 reproduced in the press, and acutely conscious of the power of the printed word,
645 understood his words would be carried abroad 'not to perish on waves of sound, not to
646 vary with the writer's hand / but fixed in time, having been verified by proof' the
647 consequences of which were far reaching. Baskerville's will is, therefore, carefully
648 considered and highly significant.⁷³ It determines how he wishes to be remembered,
649 which is not as eighteenth-century England's finest printer but as man who broke
650 through the superstitions of his age to realise a relationship with man and God based on
651 reason and carved for himself a religion based on morality. So important was this to
652 Baskerville that he not only articulated it in his will but also inscribed it on his 'conical
653 building'—*the* major prop in his theatre of death—and tied his supporting actors—his
654 executors—to the fulfilment of his wishes. It is unfortunate that Baskerville's carefully
655 designed plans, with their promise of educating both his own and future generations in
656 his beliefs, have been usurped and misinterpreted for so long by 'undiscerning writers',
657 and that facts have been obscured by fiction causing a tension between how Baskerville
658 wished to be remembered and how he has been portrayed. It can only be hoped that
659 Baskerville's self-penned *hic jacet* will one day resume its place in Birmingham and
660 honour the life, work and death of one of Birmingham's most remarkable sons: the
661 printer, deist and free-thinker, John Baskerville.

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⁷³ B. Warde, *This is a Printing Office* (London: Monotype Corporation, 1932).