

Baskerville and Franklin: Status and Success

Image: Portrait of John Baskerville (1706-1775), Type Founder and Printer, painted by James Millar in 1774. Oil on canvas.

Image from: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

When they first met in 1758, Franklin and Baskerville were both middle-aged, self-made men, fifty-two years old, both of them successful and prosperous. Baskerville's numerous visitors were very much impressed by the comfort and opulence of his house at Easy Hill. One of them wrote: "*His apartments are elegant; his stair-case is particularly curious; and the room in which he dines, and calls a smoking-room is very handsome; the grate and furniture belonging to it are, I think, of bright wrought iron and cost him a round sum...*"

In his turn, remembering his youth and the start of the career, Franklin wrote:

My breakfast was a long time bread and milk (no tea), and I ate it out of a two penny earthen porringer, with a pewter spoon. But mark how luxury will enter families, and make a progress, in spite of principle: being called one morning to breakfast, I found it in a China bowl, with a spoon of silver! They had been bought for me without my knowledge by my wife, and had cost her an enormous sum of three-and-twenty shillings, for which she had no other excuse or apology to make, but that she thought her husband deserv'd a silver spoon and China bowl as well, as any of his neighbours. This was the first appearance of plate and China in our house, which afterwards, in a course of years, as our wealth increas'd, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value."

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

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