

IAN
DONALDSON

A detailed oil painting portrait of Ben Jonson, showing him from the chest up. He has dark, curly hair, a full beard, and is wearing a dark, high-collared garment with a white ruffled shirt underneath. The background is dark and indistinct.

BEN
JONSON
A Life

BEN JONSON

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A Life



IAN DONALDSON

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FOR GRAZIA

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Abbreviations

- CSPD* *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*
- CSPV* *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian Series*
- CWBJ* *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, Print Edition, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 2011); Electronic Edition (2013)
- DNB* *The Dictionary of National Biography*
- H&S *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925–52)
- ODNB* *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Note on Texts and Dating

ALL quotations from Ben Jonson are taken from the modernized text of the seven-volume Cambridge University Press Print Edition of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, general editors David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge, 2011). The Electronic Edition of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, representing roughly four times the capacity of the Print Edition, is scheduled for publication by Cambridge University Press in 2013. This contains a range of textual and contextual materials which are cited here prospectively, wherever possible with an additional reference to their original source. In keeping with the conventions of this edition, all other quotations from the early modern period (apart from those to the works of Spenser) are silently modernized, even when taken from old-spelling editions. Manuscript material is cited in its original form only when it seems important to preserve a doubt or ambiguity (e.g. over the identity of a place or person) or other particular quality. Names are elsewhere spelled wherever possible in the preferred style of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Various systems of dating existed within Jonson's lifetime (1572–1637). On 24 February 1582 Pope Gregory XIII introduced a reformed calendar which was adopted by most Catholic countries in Europe by 1583, but resisted in England until 1751. Throughout most of Jonson's lifetime the English calendar consequently lagged ten days behind that of continental Europe. The dual system of dating is indicated here (as often in correspondence in Jonson's time) by a double citation, e.g. 12/22 November 1610. Within England, the new year was sometimes reckoned to begin on 1 January, but sometimes, in accordance with legal practice, on 25 March (Lady Day). In Scotland, the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1600, and by a simultaneous adjustment the new year was declared to begin on 1 January. All datings given here assume that the British year began on 1 January. Jonson's own varying practice in dating was examined by W. W. Greg, 'The Riddle of Jonson's Chronology', *The Library*, 6 (1926), 340–7. Greg's conclusions have now been significantly challenged by Martin Butler, 'The Riddle of Jonson's Chronology Revisited', *The Library*, 7th series, 4 (2003), 49–63.

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I



Prologue
The Biographer's Bones

'HE lies buried in the north aisle in the path of square stone (the rest of lozenge)', noted John Aubrey meticulously in his otherwise haphazard recollections of the life of Ben Jonson:

opposite to the scutcheon of Robertus de Ros, with this inscription only on him, in a pavement square of blue marble about 14 inches square,

O RARE BEN JONSON

which was done at the charge of Jack Young (afterwards knighted) who, walking there when the grave was covering, gave the fellow eighteen pence to cut it.

All details of these final arrangements for Jonson's interment are precisely observed and accounted for: the colour, location, and size of the marble tablet, the laconic wording of this last tribute, the name (and subsequent honouring) of its deviser, the fee paid to the engraver. Many facts relating to the lives of the subjects he attempted to chronicle, as Aubrey well knew, were open to question or wholly irrecoverable, but death delivered the ultimate and (as it seemed) incontrovertible items of biographical evidence. Such details he recorded whenever he could with similar fastidious care. Thus the poet Samuel Butler—so Aubrey carefully noted—lay in the churchyard of Covent Garden 'in the north part next the church at the east end. His feet touch the wall. His grave, two yards distant from the pilaster of the door (by his desire) six foot deep.' The scholar John Hales, he observed, 'lies buried in

the churchyard at Eton, under an altar monument of black marble, erected at the sole charge of Mr . . . Curwyn, with too long an epitaph'. Sir William Davenant, Jonson's immediate successor as royal laureate, 'had a coffin of walnut-tree (Sir John Denham said 'twas the finest coffin that ever he saw)', and was buried in Westminster Abbey 'in the south cross aisle, on which, on a paving stone of marble, is writ, in imitation of that on Ben Jonson, "O rare Sir Will Davenant"'. Such details play a central, validating role within Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, furnishing (so it seems) the hard, verifiable evidence on which his large, disorderly, sprawlily ambitious biographical enterprise ultimately rests.¹

Occasionally, through astounding good fortune, Aubrey was able to make even closer approaches to the realms and remains of the dead. Writing of Father William Barrow (otherwise known as Harcourt), for example, a Jesuit who was burnt at the stake at Tyburn in the aftermath of the Popish Plot, Aubrey notes that when the priest was disembowelled and his entrails thrown into the blaze,

a butcher's boy standing by was resolved to have a piece of his kidney which was broiling in the fire. He burned his fingers much, but he got it; and one . . . Roydon, a brewer in Southwark, bought it, a kind of Presbyterian. The wonder is, 'tis now absolutely petrified. I have seen it. He much values it.

I have seen it: Aubrey here offers the clinching evidence of his own senses. In another note on this event, he describes the precise feel, the tactility, of the Jesuit's kidney, which is 'now petrified and very hard. But 'twas not so hard when he first had it. It being always carried in the pocket hardened by degrees better than by the fire—like an agate polished.' The Great Fire of London provided further opportunities for biographical verification, its intense heat searing open the monuments in St Paul's to reveal the leaden coffins of Sir Philip Sidney ('which . . . I myself saw') and the former Dean of St Paul's, John Colet. This coffin,

which was lead, was full of a liquor which conserved the body. Mr Wyld and Ralph Greateorex tasted it, and 'twas a kind of insipid taste, something of an ironish taste. The body felt, to the probe of a stick which they thrust into a chink, like brawn. The coffin was of lead and laid in the wall about 2 foot ½ above the surface of the floor.

Probing, prying, thrusting, touching, tasting: Aubrey's biographical enquiries were conducted in the same empirical spirit as the anatomical dissections and

archaeological excavations that captured the imagination of contemporary scientific investigators in England. Through systematic application of Baconian method, it seemed possible to penetrate the physical mysteries and limits of human life itself, and to establish legitimate procedures for the enticing and still very new art that was gradually coming to be known as *biography*.²

Given Aubrey's abiding interest in such matters, it is safe to assume that his silence about one startling aspect of Jonson's interment was due to lack of knowledge rather than indifference. For according to common and persistent gossip, Jonson was buried in the Abbey in a vertical, not a horizontal position. He did not lie in his grave (it was said), but stood. Peter Cunningham offers an explanatory version of the story in his *Handbook of London* more than two centuries after the event:

One day, being rallied by the Dean of Westminster about being buried in the Poets' Corner, the poet is said to have replied (we tell the story as current in the Abbey): 'I am too poor for that, and no one will lay out funeral charges upon me. No, sir, 6 feet long by 2 feet wide is too much for me: 2 feet by 2 feet will do for all I want.'

In a variant of the tale, Jonson asks Charles I to grant him eighteen square inches of ground; the King agrees, then asks where this ground may be: 'In Westminster Abbey', says Jonson; 'Your request is granted,' responds the King. Numerous implausible legends were attached, for convenience' sake, to Ben Jonson's name in the years following his death, and both versions of this anecdote sound suspiciously like late and fanciful inventions.³ It is the more surprising then to find that the central proposition in these stories, that Jonson had been buried in a vertical position—impatiently dismissed as ludicrous by earlier historians of Westminster Abbey—appears to have been literally true.

In 1919 the American scholar Joseph Quincy Adams—distinguished Shakespearian editor and biographer, later to be appointed as inaugural Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC—published an intriguing study entitled 'The Bones of Ben Jonson', in which he reviewed the evidence revealed during three separate exposures of Jonson's grave during the previous century.⁴ The first disruption occurred in 1823, when the grave was opened to allow a new corpse to be buried in the adjacent plot. An eyewitness, writing later as 'J.C.B.' in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, reported that Jonson's body, clearly exposed during this exercise, had indeed been buried in a vertical position, but—somewhat incongruously—with the head

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