

IAN
DONALDSON

A detailed oil painting 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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Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	x
<i>List of Figures</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xviii
<i>Note on Texts and Dating</i>	xix
1 Prologue: The Biographer's Bones	1
2 Scotland 1618–1619	22
3 Debatable Land 1542–1572	52
4 Influences 1572–1588	58
5 Conflicts 1588–1592	83
6 Entering the Theatre 1594–1597	99
7 Saved by the Book 1597–1598	123
8 Global Satire 1598–1601	145
9 The Wolf's Black Jaw 1601–1603	175
10 Scots, Plots, and Panegyrics 1603–1605	193
11 Following the Plot 1605–1607	224
12 Employment 1607–1610	235
13 Communities 1607–1612	255
14 Travels 1611–1613	271
15 Fame 1613–1616	304
16 Money 1614–1617	332
17 Scholarship 1619–1630	349
18 Growing Old 1619–1626	382
19 Dying Late 1626–1637	399
20 Remembrance with Posterity	429
<i>Notes</i>	442
<i>Index</i>	517

List of Plates

Frontispiece. Ben Jonson, by Abraham van Blyenberch, c.1617

© National Portrait Gallery, London

1. William Drummond of Hawthornden. Anonymous painting on wood, 1623.
Edinburgh University Library
2. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Hawthornden Castle in 1842, painted in 1844 by Sir William Allen
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh/The Bridgeman Art Library
3. William Camden, scholar and antiquary, by Marcus Gheeraerts the younger, 1622
The Provost and Fellows of Worcester College, Oxford: photo by Photographic Survey, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London
4. Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, c.1596, after Marcus Gheeraerts the younger
National Portrait Gallery, London/The Bridgeman Art Library
5. John Donne: engraving by William Marshall (from a lost portrait of 1591), in the 1635 edition of Donne's *Poems*
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce D 38)
6. Elizabeth I as Iris: the Rainbow portrait, c.1600. Attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts
Courtesy of the Marquess of Salisbury
7. Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, portrait by unknown follower of Hieronymus Custodis, 1594
Reproduced by courtesy of the Mercers' Company
8. King James VI and I, by John de Critz the younger
Alfredo Dagli Orti/Palazzo Pitti Florence/The Art Archive
9. Queen Anne of Denmark. Studio of Nicholas Hilliard, vellum on playing card, c.1610
Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge/The Bridgeman Art Library

LIST OF PLATES

10. Lucy Harington, Countess of Bedford, in masquing costume; attributed to John de Critz the elder
Reproduced by kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Bedford and the Trustees of the Bedford Estates
11. William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. Studio of Daniel Mytens
Private Collection/Photo © Philip Mould Ltd London/The Bridgeman Art Library
12. King James VI and I in procession to Parliament. From Michael van Meer's *Album Amicorum*
Edinburgh University Library
13. Prince Henry on horseback with Time as lance-bearer, by Robert Peake
Collection at Parham Park, West Sussex
14. Penshurst Place, Kent, home to the Sidney family since 1552.
Heritage House Group
15. William and Robert Sidney, sons of Lord and Lady Lisle, by an unknown artist
By kind permission of Viscount De L'Isle from his private collection at Penshurst Place, Kent, England
16. Lady Mary Wroth and her mother, Barbara Gamage, Lady Lisle, by Marcus Gheeraerts the younger
By kind permission of Viscount De L'Isle from his private collection at Penshurst Place, Kent, England
17. Sir Walter Raleigh and his eldest son Walter, by an unknown artist
© National Portrait Gallery, London
18. Sir Thomas Overbury by Sylvester Harding after Marcus Gheeraerts the younger
© National Portrait Gallery, London
19. Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, by John de Critz
Courtesy of the Marquess of Salisbury
20. George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, attributed to William Larkin
© National Portrait Gallery, London
21. Edmund Bolton's petition for the establishment of the Academ Roial
© The British Library Board (Harley MS 6103, 2^v, 3)
22. Portrait of John Selden by an unknown artist
© National Portrait Gallery, London

LIST OF PLATES

23. Venetia Digby on her death-bed, by Van Dyck
By Permission of the Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery
24. Sir Kenelm Digby, by Van Dyck
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

List of Figures

1. Jonson as Horace. William Marshall's engraved title page of 1640 duodecimo, *Q. Horatius Flaccus, his Art of Poetry, Englished by Ben Jonson*, printed for John Benson, 1640 19
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce G 60, title page)
2. The cities of London and Westminster: Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's map from volume 1 of *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, Cologne, 1572 23
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford ((E) C17:70 London (1311))
3. The cities of London and Edinburgh: details from John Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, 1611 25
Antiquarian Images
4. James VI and I in Edinburgh: engraving from William Drummond's *Forth Feasting*, 1617 30
Edinburgh University Library
5. Title page of *Coryate's Crudities*, engraved by William Hole, 1611 32
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce c 660, title page)
6. Title page of *Kemp's Nine-Days' Wonder*, 1600 33
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (4° L62 (12) Art, title page)
7. William Cavendish on horseback at Bolsover Castle: copper engraving after Abraham van Diepenbeeck 38
The Art Archive
8. Seeing the future: Galileo's telescope 60
Museo della Scienza, Florence © 2011 Photo Scala
9. Sir Kenelm Digby's horoscope, drawn up by himself 62
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (MS.Ashmole 174, fo. 75)
10. Hartshorn Lane. From William Faithorne's 1658 'Exact delineation of the Cities of London and Westminster and the Suburbs', London Topographical Society, 1905 66
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford ((E) C17:70 London(442))
11. Westminster Scholar by Rudolph Ackermann, 1816 74
Westminster School Archives

LIST OF FIGURES

12. Map of the Low Countries, from *The Commentaries of Sir Francis Vere*, 1657 96
 Rare Printed Collection, State Library of Victoria
13. Thespis and his cart: William Hole's engraved title page (detail) for Jonson's 1616 Folio *Works* 104
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce I 302, detail of Thespis and cart)
14. *The Spanish Tragedy: Or, Hieronimo is Mad Again*: detail from 1615 title page 105
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Mal.212 (6))
15. Francis Langley's Swan theatre in 1596–7 112
 Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library
16. The Alnwick manuscript (MS fo. 1a) 121
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (25778 c 6, fo. 1, Collotype facsimile of an Elizabethan manuscript)
17. The first Globe theatre. Detail from Visscher's *View of London*, 1616 155
 © Bettmann/CORBIS
18. Paul's Walk, engraving by Wenceslas Hollar, from William Dugdale, *The History of St Paul's Cathedral*, 1658 157
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (E5 7b Art, p. 167)
19. Draft coat of arms to John Shakespeare (detail), 1596 161
 College of Arms MS Shakespeare Grants 1
20. Aubigny-sur-Nère (Haut-Berry, France) in 1589 183
 Ville de Bourges
21. *Londinium* from Stephen Harrison's *Arches of Triumph*, 1604 197
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Gough Lond. 145, Londinium)
22. Inigo Jones by Van Dyck 201
 © Devonshire Collection Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees
23. Inigo Jones, A Daughter of the Niger, from *The Masque of Blackness* 204
 © Devonshire Collection Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees

LIST OF FIGURES

24. George Chapman. Engraving by William Hole, frontispiece to Chapman's <i>The Whole Works of Homer</i> , 1616. Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library	208
25. George Chapman's letter from prison to King James, Folger MS V.a.32 By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	210
26. Jonson's letter from prison to the Earl of Pembroke, Folger MS V.a.321 By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library	211
27. The Gunpowder conspirators © National Portrait Gallery, London	217
28. Jonson's letter to Robert Cecil, 7 November 1605, holograph in <i>CSPD, James I</i> , November 1605 The National Archives Image Library (SP14/16)	221
29a. Inigo Jones, elevation for the New Exchange, 1609 The Provost and Fellows of Worcester College, Oxford: photo by Conway Library, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London	242
29b. Robert Smythson, elevation for the New Exchange, 1609 RIBA Drawings Collection	242
30. <i>The Masque of Queens</i> holograph ©The British Library Board (Royal.18.a.xlv fo. 7 ^v)	251
31a. Henri IV of France assassinated by François Ravailiac	273
31b. Ravailiac's execution in the Place de Grève, Paris Roger-Viollet/Topfoto	274
32. Inigo Jones, costume for Prince Henry as Oberon in <i>The Masque of Oberon</i> , 1611 © Devonshire Collection Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees	278
33. Inigo Jones, Oberon's palace: final design for <i>The Masque of Oberon</i> , 1611 © Devonshire Collection Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees	279
34. Good and Bad Fame: Raleigh's <i>History of the World</i> title page, 1614 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (K3.6 Art, title page)	305

LIST OF FIGURES

35. ‘The Mind of the Frontispiece to a Book’: Jonson’s verses on Raleigh’s frontispiece, *The Underwood*, 24, from Jonson’s 1641 Folio. 306
 ©The British Library Board (C.28.m.11 vol. 1)
36. Fame standing on a globe in *Chloridia* (1631): Inigo Jones’s final design. 308
 © Devonshire Collection Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees
37. Frances Howard by Simon van de Passe 310
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (4° Rawl. 170, fo. 129)
38. Jonson’s autograph manuscript ‘To the Most Noble, and Above his Titles, Robert, Earl of Somerset’ 315
 ©The British Library Board (C.28.m.11)
39. ‘To Sir Thomas Overbury’, *Epigrams*, 113, from Jonson’s 1616 Folio *Works* 320
 ©The British Library Board (C.39.k.9)
40. Jonson, *Works*, 1616 Folio, engraved title page by William Hole 325
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce I 302, title page)
41. King James, *Works*, 1616, engraved title page by Renold Elstracke 328
 Private Collection/The Stapleton Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library
42. The Catalogue from Jonson’s 1616 Folio *Works* 330
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Douce I 302, ‘Catalogue’)
43. Jonson’s signature and motto, in his personal copy of Aldo Manuzio the younger’s *De Quaesitis per Epistolam Libri III*, Venice, 1576 357
 Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library (Z.6.72)
44. Portrait of Robert Cotton engraved by Thomas Cross 359
 Mary Evans Picture Library
45. Portrait of Ben Jonson by George Vertue 361
 © City of Westminster Archive Centre, London/The Bridgeman Art Library
- 46a. ‘To the Reader’ from Shakespeare’s 1623 First Folio 372
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Arch G.c.8, fo. 32a, ‘To the Reader’)
- 46b. ‘To My Beloved, the Author, Master William Shakespeare and What He Hath Left Us’, from Shakespeare’s 1623 First Folio 372
 The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Arch G.c.8, fo. 32b)

LIST OF FIGURES

- 46c. Martin Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare, from 1623 First Folio 375
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (Arch G.c.8, fo. 33,
Martin Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare)
47. Gresham College, London: engraving by George
Vertue from John Ward's *Lives of the Professors of
Gresham College*, 1740 377
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (V.5.9 Jur, opp.P.32)
48. Robert Vaughan's engraved portrait of Jonson, c.1627 400
Getty Images

Family Trees

- The Howards 225
The Sidneys and Herberts 286

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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