



Ben Jonson: A Life

Ian Donaldson

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Ben Jonson was the greatest of Shakespeare's contemporaries. In the century following his death he was seen by many as the finest of all English writers, living or dead. His fame rested not only on the numerous plays he had written for the theatre, but on his achievements over three decades as principal masque-writer to the early Stuart court, where he had worked in creative, and often stormy, collaboration with Inigo Jones. One of the most accomplished poets of the age, he had become - in fact if not in title - the first Poet Laureate in England.

Jonson's life was full of drama. Serving in the Low Countries as a young man, he overcame a Spanish adversary in single combat in full view of both the armies. His early satirical play, *The Isle of Dogs*, landed him in prison, and brought all theatrical activity in London to a temporary — and very nearly to a permanent — standstill. He was 'almost at the gallows' for killing a fellow actor after a quarrel, and converted to Catholicism while awaiting execution. He supped with the Gunpowder conspirators on the eve of their planned coup at Westminster. After satirizing the Scots in *Eastward Ho!* he was imprisoned again; and throughout his career was repeatedly interrogated about plays and poems thought to contain seditious or slanderous material. In his middle years, twenty stone in weight, he walked to Scotland and back, seemingly partly to fulfil a wager, and partly to see the land of his forebears. He travelled in Europe as tutor to the mischievous son of Sir Walter Raleigh, who 'caused him to be drunken and dead drunk' and wheeled provocatively through the streets of Paris. During his later years he presided over a sociable club in the Apollo Room in Fleet Street, mixed with the most learned scholars of his day, and viewed with keen interest the political, religious, and scientific controversies of the day.

Ian Donaldson's new biography draws on freshly discovered writings by and about Ben Jonson, and locates his work within the social and intellectual contexts of his time. Jonson emerges from this study as a more complex and volatile character than his own self-declarations (and much modern scholarship) would allow, and as a writer whose work strikingly foresees - and at times pre-emptively satirizes - the modern age.

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