



Shakespeare Matters

"The Voice of the Shakespeare Fellowship"

Vol.3:no.1

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments..."

Fall 2003

William Camden

What did he say, and when did he say it?

By Paul M. Altrocchi, MD

Truth hath a quiet breast. (Richard II)

The prolific William Camden is recognized as England's first influential historian. Born in 1551 and buried in Westminster Abbey in 1623, his 72 years spanned all but the first year of Edward de Vere's life and bridged the entire life of William Shaksper of Stratford-on-Avon.

Camden graduated from Oxford at age 20, then toured Europe before joining the faculty of Westminster School in 1575, becoming headmaster in 1593. One of his pupils was Ben Jonson. As a hobby, Camden traveled throughout the British Isles collecting information on its cities and towns, including their worthy citizens and their contributions to English culture.

Two generations of Oxfordians have known that Camden, in describing noteworthy persons from Stratford-on-Avon in his *Britannia*, failed to mention either William Shaksper or the playwright William Shakespeare (1, 2). The details of that important omission, not hitherto described, are presented here and the significance for the authorship debate is reassessed.

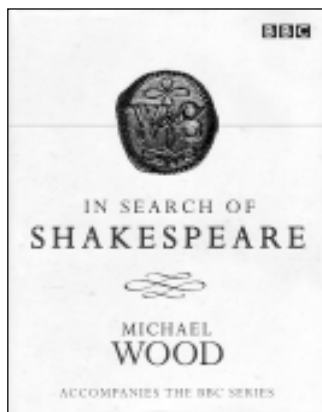
Camden's books

Camden's major works were (3,4):

1. *Britannia, A Chorographical*
(Continued on page 14)

Drive, they said

As the year winds down amid revised Shakespeare bios, authorship novels and anti-Oxfordian tracts, is there any doubt who's driving?



Two books published this summer have upped the ante on the centuries-old authorship debate. Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* (r) and Prof. Alan Nelson's biography of Oxford, *Monstrous Adversary* (l) are a one-two punch counter-offensive that belie the notion that there is no authorship debate.

In the 20 years since Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* reignited the authorship debate there has been a steady progression of interest in the issue and a regular appearance of it in both the major media (PBS's *Frontline*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers*, *Time*, *US News and World Report*, *The New York Times*, etc.) and on the campuses of some academic institutions. In addition, the emergence of the internet in the 1990s has undoubtedly fostered even more interest
(Continued on page 6)

Book Review

Nelson's new Oxford biography

One man's interpretation of the record

By Richard Whalen

Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. By Alan H. Nelson. Liverpool University Press, 2003.

It's a plethora of archival transcriptions, but it misconstrues the personality of a genius.

Alan Nelson, a recently retired English professor, has written an intensively researched but flawed biography of the 17th

Earl of Oxford, suggesting that scandalous incidents in his life and his allegedly poor spelling make him unworthy of Shakespeare's works.

Nelson admits to a "harsh judgment," and he's right on that score. Oxford certainly led an eccentric, tumultuous, sometimes scandalous life, but that does not preclude him from having written the great plays and poems. To the contrary, it argues

(Continued on page 22)

Drive, they said (cont'd from page 1)

than could ever have happened otherwise.

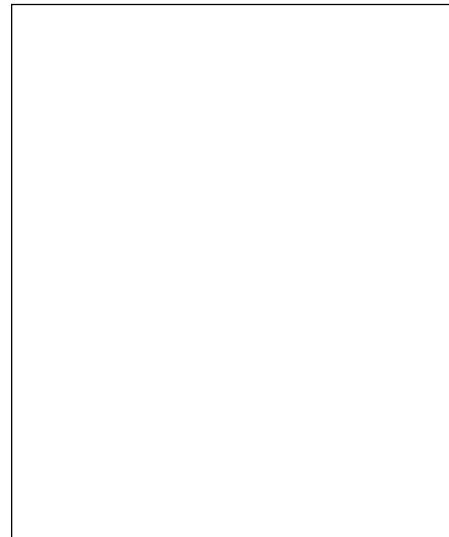
And as this interest has grown, so has a concerted effort from the entrenched interests of mainstream Stratfordians to fight back and prop up their story, even as they denigrate Oxfordians and claim there is no debate. Two books have recently been published which underscore this changing landscape, and represent the boldest counterattack yet on the Oxfordian movement. While these books do not on the face of things appear to be connected in any way, they really are—and not just because they were both published in the United Kingdom, backed up by the prestige of universities and such establishment media as the BBC.

Recently longtime Oxfordian Gordon Cyr, an officer of the Shakespeare Oxford Society in the 1970s and 1980s, recalled a letter that Charlton Ogburn had sent him around the time he had decided to embark on writing *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. “All I want,” he recalls Ogburn writing, “is to get these [Stratfordians] to come out and fight.” The Nelson and Wood books, more than anything else published in the last 20 years, represent the fulfillment of Ogburn’s hopes. Since 1984 the more usual pattern has been for surrogate defenders of Stratford to tackle the authorship debate and Oxfordians, ranging from freelance scholar Irv Matus in his 1994 *Shakespeare, In Fact*, to such non-English Department warriors as David Kathman and Terry Ross on the internet (while the debate is forbidden on the mainstream ListServ discussion group SHAKSPER), and including all the lawyers and other non-establishment types who have participated in various debates and moot courts over the years. One exception to this pattern was the appearance of Harvard’s Marjorie Garber, Yale’s Harold Bloom, and the Folger Shakespeare Library’s Gail Kern Paster in the April 1999 *Harpers* magazine article on the authorship. But generally, major academic institutions in both the US and the UK—and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust—have really responded by trying to stay above it all; “there is no debate” has been the standard party line.

But with Liverpool University now publishing UC-Berkeley English professor Nelson, and the BBC teamed up with the Birthplace Trust to publish Wood, that has changed. Both these books represent the key players—academic English de-

partments and Stratford-on-Avon itself—coming out and fighting.

It would be fair to say that neither of these books would have been created except for the Oxfordian movement. Certainly that is the case of Nelson’s biography of Edward de Vere, *Monstrous Adversary* (see Richard Whalen’s review, beginning on page one). Would Nelson have ever tackled this subject, save for Oxford’s candidacy as Shakespeare? No. And what Nelson does in *Monstrous* is to cite—and



often reproduce in full—every known record and document relating to Oxford, and then interpret them consistently in perjorative terms. The anti-Oxfordian thesis that underlies his efforts fairly flies off each page.

As Whalen’s review also shows—and as others are quickly learning as they read *Monstrous*—Nelson is prone not to just gross misinterpretations, but also to some incredible errors. At the recently concluded Shakespeare Fellowship Conference in Carmel, California, Christopher Paul presented one such error on page 432, where Nelson describes a letter signed by the young 18th Earl of Oxford as being about “white herrings,” and written by an adult for the boy’s “entertainment.” It turns out, as Paul clearly demonstrated, that the “wytheringes” spelling in the letter was meant to be a proper name: Wytherings (possibly Anthony Wytherings, who held on office related to overseeing forests, which is the subject of the letter). With mistakes like this must wonder how much there is to fear in Nelson’s book.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Michael Wood—in collaboration with the

BBC and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford—has produced an unabashedly pro-Stratford work, *In Search of Shakespeare*, which is both a four-hour television documentary and an accompanying 352-page book. Wood’s efforts are nothing short of a total reinvention of the Stratfordian biography, and, like Nelson, he makes documents from the era a centerpiece of his presentation. In a regular *leit-motif* of the film we see Wood in an archive, an office or an estate library, wearing protective white gloves, proudly showing us the name “Shaksper” or “Shakespeare” or some variant (e.g. “Shake-shafte”) on a yellowed piece of parchment.

Indeed, if there is one unifying theme that links Nelson and Wood it is their use of—and reverence for—the documentary evidence. But what is not so readily apparent on a first viewing or reading is that what they say about these documents is *their* interpretation of what the documents *may* mean and how they *may* fit into the story *they* are telling.

What really is of interest to Oxfordians in Wood’s efforts, is how much he owes his retelling of the Stratford tale to the influence of the authorship movement and its core argument about how real art gets written, and how real artists are influenced by the world they live in (including family, politics and religion) and draw upon it for their both their inspiration and material. The Oxfordian movement has been the strongest in this regard, since its story is of Hamlet himself trapped in a court and a court life he didn’t make, but which he now must set right. All his efforts revolve around “words, words, words,” including, of course, a provocative play meant to catch the conscience of the king. And in the end he dies, asking someone else to tell his story to set right his “wounded name.”

Eighty years ago J. Thomas Looney wrote in *Shakespeare Identified* that the authorship problem was not a literary problem, but a historical and political one. Many Oxfordians today would say how right he was. And what Wood is really doing here is stealing this persuasive argument and making it Stratfordian.

As we noted briefly in our last issue, the single most important element of Wood’s story is the Catholicism of the Stratford man’s father John, along with the involvement of other cousins and possible Warwickshire acquaintances in the recusant Catholic underground. While this

can be seen to give the Stratford story both a reason for secrecy and a reason for some of the religious and moral content of the plays, it actually breaks down pretty quickly under closer examination, and a number of mainstream scholars perceive this and want little or nothing to do with Wood's retelling of the Stratford story (see the article by Prof. Daniel Wright on page eight for some further insights into Catholicism and Shakespeare).

There are other important changes in the traditional biography throughout the film, but the one of most interest, especially to Oxfordians, is Wood's treatment of the 3rd Earl of Southampton—he is more or less deleted from the Shakespeare/Stratford story. Without even acknowledging the significance of what he is doing, Wood simply states that the Sonnets were written to William Herbert in the 1590s. Having done this, when he comes to the 1601 Essex Rebellion and the use of *Richard II* by the conspirators, Southampton is merely one of the others, not even mentioned as Essex's chief partner, let alone also being Shakespeare's Fair Youth. So a key point in the Oxfordian political interpretation of the Sonnets is neutralized, and Sonnet 107, thought by many (Stratfordians and Oxfordians) to refer to Southampton's "confined doom," need not even be mentioned.

Yet the Sonnets are used throughout the film as commentary on the author's life, most notably in using Sonnet 145's "hate away" to mean "Hathaway," and thus a comment on the Stratford man's wife, or having Sonnet 33's "the sun was but one hour mine" refer to the death of Hamnet Shaksper in 1596 (thus taking the sun/son idea cited by some Oxfordians and making it Stratfordian).

In recent discussions about both these books during the Fellowship's Carmel Conference it was suggested that they are not really that big a deal, and certainly not designed as a coordinated counter-offensive. Well, true, we have no evidence that Nelson and Wood worked together, or that the publication of these books virtually together was planned in any way.

But come out together they did, giving all the appearances of a coordinated counter-offensive. And if this is the establishment's best shot at defending Stratford, then Stratford may soon be ending—not with bang, but a whimper.

—W. Boyle

Triumph of (the) Will?

New bio, new facts - same old propaganda

By Joe Eldredge

Last spring the BBC subjected its viewers to four hours of TV financed by the real estate interests of the theme park on the river Avon. The production, ironically titled *In Search of Shakespeare*, and written and presented by Michael Wood in conjunction with the Royal Shakespeare Company, will be shown in the US in January. The film is a towering piece of cynical propaganda. But it is also a generous gift to that growing number of readers who simply do not believe the canon was written by a recusant Catholic from Warwickshire.

No doubt we will be hearing much about this religious swamp-on-Avon. Wood's evidence supporting William of Stratford's recusant background and beliefs is impressive, if not conclusive; but the director is describing someone other than the actual author of the plays. Nevertheless, the alleged Catholicism of the Shaksper family is useful to Wood: it helps to create a pseudo-excuse for the lingering mystery over authorship.

But of course there is nothing mysterious about Wood's author; he is always in full view. Was the film made with literary mirrors? It is glaringly obvious that the team producing this mediocre fiction understands that there is very little in the canon to indicate the alleged Catholic convictions of its author(s). Wood, however, salivates onscreen when he discovers that someone named "William Shakeshaft"—obviously the poet!—has documented connections to Lancashire recusants.

This film is a study in empty propaganda. There are no arguments in it. It is just a form of brainwashing for anyone who might (heaven forbid) have heard that there was some other guy—like what's his name?

Wood's book follows the TV series closely enough to allow us to understand its structure. It is a sparkling collection of every Stratford gambit since the work of John Aubrey: the circular reasoning, the

must-have-beens, the liberties of sequence (time-joints). Although it contains numerous passages which are evidently responding to Oxfordian arguments found in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* and other books, the authorship question as such is never mentioned. My cursory list of such covert "Ox-Blocs" will no doubt be doubled by the real scholars among us; but even the existing items on my initial list on the Shakespeare Fellowship website Discussion Forums are a testament to the compound intellectual dishonesty of the BBC production and the book. (Look for the "Michael Wood still 'Searching for Shakespeare,'" thread in the *State of the Debate* Forum, www.shakespearefellowship.org)

The concept of circular reasoning probably never came up at BBC editorial/production conferences. But of the book's 344 pages, 111 contain a total of 226 instances of assigning material from the canon to the life of the author of choice. And, of course, an even larger body of "must-have-beens" enriches this fictional triumph of will. There at least 397 of these spread out over 151 pages. For instance: "Shakespeare must have had, "for boys in Stratford were given," etc., etc. So, the underlying argument throughout is that we can just assume this or that—with certainty no less.

An accurate list of Wood's many confirmations that indeed "time is out of joint" must await detailed analysis, if it ever becomes necessary to examine this catafalque further; but chances are, no such critique will be required. Wood's works will collapse under their own weight. With so delinquent a factual basis, can BBC defend these productions as part of a larger commitment to its national and world public? I think not. Is it willing to allow equal time and funds for a rebuttal? Probably not. The BBC has, at least at this point in time, placed its very considerable resources on the line to defend the disintegrating myth of Stratford.

Monstrous Adversary (cont'd from page 1) that like many other writers of genius who were guilty of similar erratic behavior, he was just the kind of writer who would have produced the works of Shakespeare. Think of the brutality in *Titus Andronicus* and the father-daughter incest in *Pericles*, and especially the autobiographical *Hamlet* with his bursts of antic euphoria and plunges into suicidal depression.

Indeed, it is their complex personalities that are richly reflected in the works of great writers. Nelson seems unaware of this phenomenon in the lives of writers of accomplishment, from Lord Byron to John O'Hara.

Although his subject is the leading candidate for authorship honors, Nelson says almost nothing about the controversy. Oxfordians eager to see how a Stratfordian English professor addresses the evidence will be disappointed. He never summarizes the arguments and doesn't even mention the parallels between Oxford's life and Shakespeare's works. Nor does he present the case for the Stratford man. Almost incidental is his view of what the archival records say about Oxford's qualifications to have written Shakespeare. His focus is solely on Oxford's life as merely an "object of curiosity" for historians.

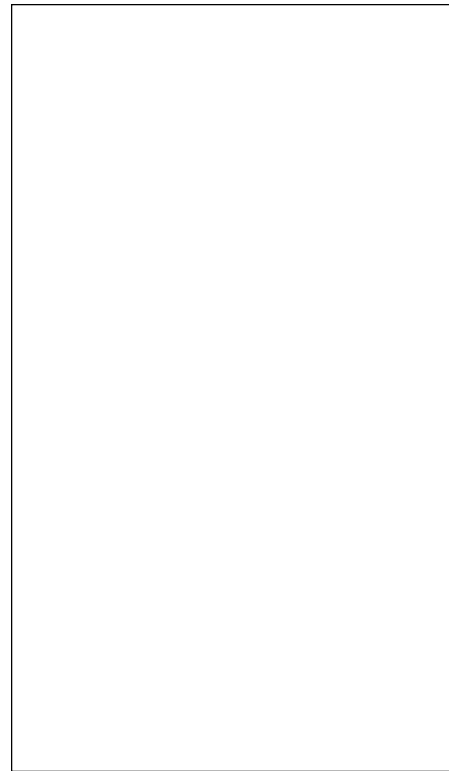
The archival records themselves fairly overwhelm the book and may overwhelm the reader. The transcriptions, which appear in smaller type on virtually every one of the 442 pages, retain the spelling and grammar of Elizabethan handwritten records. Some are two and three pages long. A few are in untranslated Latin and Spanish. While Oxfordian scholars will appreciate the extraordinary number of verbatim transcriptions, the book will be hard going, almost impenetrable, for the general reader. It is a book to be used, not to be read.

Unfortunately, it suffers from several flawed interpretations, a selective use of evidence and a casual bias against Oxford as Shakespeare from cover to cover. The title, *Monstrous Adversary*, is from a denunciation of Oxford by one of his enemies.

Alan Nelson is a youthful professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of several books on the early English stage. One of his works in progress is a biography of Shakespeare of Stratford as the author Shakespeare. (Yet

another biography!) Although not a career Shakespeare scholar, he has had considerable experience researching archives and deciphering 16th century handwriting.

To his credit, he debates with Oxfordians at their conferences, at social occasions and on the internet. He has been a genial critic and friendly adversary, keeping Oxfordians on their toes with his challenges. His archival research into the documents on Oxford has no equal, and he



shares all his findings with Oxfordians. Serious Oxfordian scholars will want the book on their shelf, handy to consult, even though it offers no significant new evidence.

Besides sharing his work-in-progress, Nelson plans to deposit with Oxfordians his original research papers and potentially some of the royalties from his book. His transcriptions will go to the Edward de Vere Collection at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon, the site of the annual de Vere Studies Conference, directed by Professor Daniel Wright. And he says he will donate the royalties from the sale of the second thousand copies of his book to the conference.

A number of contemporary Oxfordian scholars and writers appear in the acknowl-

edgments, foremost among them Nina Green, an independent researcher who leads a list of eleven Oxfordians. He even gives an example of her help. She is active on the Internet but has not published in the Oxfordian newsletters or journals (she does maintain a website at: _____).

Nelson sketches historical aspects of the authorship controversy in the Introduction but then mentions it briefly in passing only three times in the eighty-five chapters that follow. In the Introduction, he notes simply that Oxford has been "touted" as the author of Shakespeare's works, that J. Thomas Looney was the originator, that Bernard M. Ward's 1928 biography has several shortcomings, and that partial credit for scholarship is due Charles Wisner Barrell and Gwynneth Bowen. He dismisses the Ogburns, parents and son, as "contributing nothing substantial in the way of original documentary research."

In the five-page Introduction, Nelson manages to commit three factual errors. He spells Barrell's name wrong (also in the index but correctly in the bibliography) and gives the wrong publication date for *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* by Charlton Ogburn (1984 not 1975.)

More seriously, he says Ward "confined his overt speculation [that Oxford was Shakespeare] to interstitial chapters which he called interludes." In fact, the interludes are simply digressions. Ward's only mention of Shakespeare is at the end of the fourth and last interlude where he says he refrained from comment on the authorship controversy, just the opposite of "overt speculation." A bibliographic appendix does include works by seven non-Stratfordians, including Looney and Eva Turner Clark. Nelson does not mention it.

His lapses in the Introduction inevitably raise doubts about his knowledge of Oxfordian works, and unfortunately about the accuracy of the rest of the book. Several Oxfordians offered to review Nelson's manuscript, but he declined.

He is already hearing about factual errors and serious misrepresentations. For example, he says Oxford was not "a fully competent practitioner of his native English" because he misspelled words, including some that he had apparently "misheard." (How he knows what Oxford heard is not explained.) He concludes that "clearly Oxford's language was not the language of

Shakespeare.” (The bluster of “clearly” from a scholar usually betrays some hesitancy.) Nina Green, however, had already shown that many of the words are not misspellings but are readily found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Nelson chose to ignore some of her corrections, probably because they undermined his view of Oxford’s language skills. Oxfordians will cry “foul!”

Nelson also infers from the record that William Cecil Lord Burghley was a benevolent, long-suffering guardian and father-in-law, forever rescuing a renegade Oxford from his escapades and financial difficulties. Most Oxfordians do not agree with that interpretation.

Nelson’s general view of Ward is that he is a “worthy (if partisan) historian” but “more hagiographer than historian.” He accuses “partisan apologists” for Oxford of seeing him through rose-colored glasses and creating what he calls a myth of an admirable poet and dramatist. He doesn’t cite any examples, but he probably could have. Oxfordians may well consider that Nelson himself is a worthy (if biased) historian but, in his case, more demonologist than biographer. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere between the extremes.

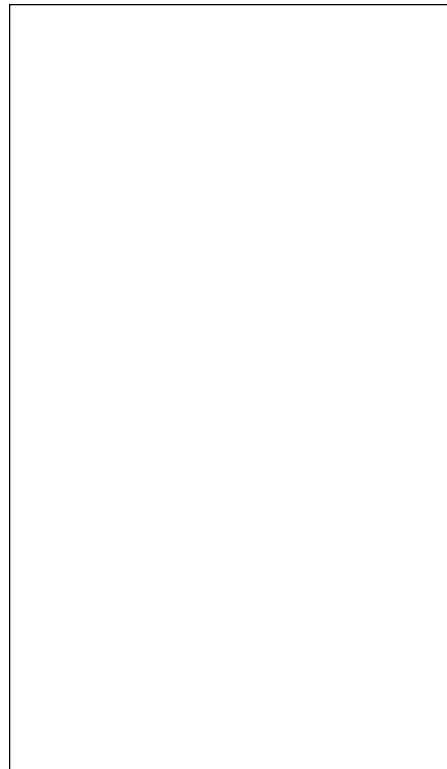
Throughout *Monstrous Adversary*, Nelson interprets documents in a way that he considers blots on Oxford’s character, disqualifying him as Shakespeare. They show that Oxford was a “youthful hot head” and quarrelsome, that his “first aim in life was to serve himself,” not others, that he was a spendthrift, that he was superstitious and dealt in necromancy, that he consorted with prostitutes in Venice and caught syphilis, that he was debauched and riotous, that he was bisexual and had sexual relations with boys, that his “braggadocio was unmatched by manly deeds,” and that “foppishness was Oxford’s most characteristic trait.”

Oxford’s “most characteristic pose,” he says, was “presiding at a well-furnished table, flanked by male companions, high in his cups, firing satirical salvos and witticisms, enlisting his guests in his conspiratorial fantasies...allowing scandalous talk at his table.”

Nelson’s deems all this unworthy of Shakespeare. But he misunderstands the typical personality of a great genius. The life that he finds “so privately scandalous” (publicly, too) sounds just like the life of

many artists and writers of genius.

As Kay Redfield Jamison of Johns Hopkins University pointed out in *Touched With Fire*, great artists and writers have often been by turns difficult, charming, eccentric, brilliant, egotistical, generous, profligate and sometimes sexually reprehensible. John O’Hara was a very nasty drunk and bully who said he had never struck a woman except in anger. He was totally selfish, coarse and cantankerous.



But he wrote great short stories. Tennessee Williams was a notoriously unreliable drunk. F. Scott Fitzgerald was erratic, cruel, probably bisexual and a very poor speller who died broke. Count Tolstoy was famously eccentric and difficult. And, of course, Lord Byron, at war with the world, led a most scandalous life.

So Nelson is right. Oxford did lead an extravagant and sometimes scandalous life. But he’s wrong to conclude that this disqualifies him from having written the works of Shakespeare. Indeed, it supports the case for him as a literary genius, especially in contrast to the life of Will Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon—a “life of mundane inconsequence,” according to the great orthodox scholar Samuel Schoenbaum.

Who’s an amateur?

The back cover of Alan Nelson’s new biography of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, *Monstrous Adversary* (taken from his Introduction), proclaims his reason for writing the book:

Since 1920 Oxford has been touted by amateur historians and conspiracy theorists as the true author of the poems and plays of William Shakespeare. It has become a matter of urgency to measure the real Oxford against the myth created by his apologists, and uncritically embraced by television documentaries, by playwrights, and by the popular press.

So, before we have even opened the book, examined his work and given an assessment of its perceptions and revelations about its subject, historical accuracy and evidentiary value, Nelson has, in my view, launched his enterprise, or “touted” it, to use his aggressive vocabulary, with an essentially bogus premise delivered in both offensive and misleading language.

Though he himself is not a professional historian, he nonetheless categorizes as “amateurs” the many professionals from other fields who (like himself) have engaged in Oxfordian studies (some of them for many more years than he), and further impugns their credentials by adding to their numbers those he deems to be “conspiracy theorists.” From here it’s a short leap to the melodramatic assertion that (after 80 years of this) there is an urgent need to stop the mythologizing of Oxford created by his “apologists,” a locution designed to suggest that Oxfordian studies “make excuses” for Oxford by those Nelson names “true believers” in his Introduction.

In the very moment, therefore, of declaring the dire necessity for someone to set the record straight about Oxford, Nelson is misrepresenting Oxfordians, not to mention “television documentaries” (wouldn’t that be documentary filmmakers?), playwrights (are there that many?) and the popular press (*The New York Times*?), who are all supposedly “embracing” Oxford as Shakespeare without engaging in a single critical thought.

Well, he had to do something to “tout” his book.

—K.C. Ligon