



Shakespeare Matters

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

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William Camden

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

By Paul H. 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.^{1,1a} The details of that important omission, not hitherto described, are presented here and the significance for the authorship debate is reassessed.

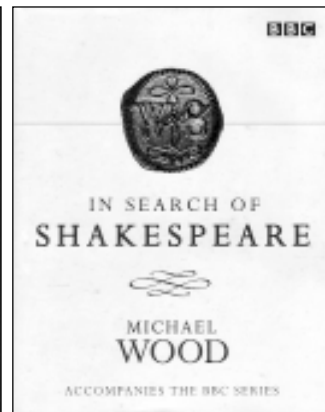
Camden's books

Camden's major works were:^{2,2a}

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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
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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.**

After trolling for primary source documents in the archives for years, Alan Nelson has emerged with a flawed biography of the 17th Earl of Oxford as an Elizabethan curiosity who, by the way, could not have written the works of Shake-

speare because of the scandalous incidents in his life and his allegedly poor spelling.

Nelson admits to a "harsh judgment" of Oxford's character, a judgment that is largely justifiable. Oxford did lead 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 that like many other writers of genius who were

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Monstrous Adversary (cont'd from page 1) guilty of similar erratic behavior he was just the kind of writer who would have produced the works of Shakespeare.

An object of curiosity

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 in a biography of Oxford 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. His focus is solely on Oxford's life as merely an "object of curiosity" for historians. Almost incidental is his view of what the archival records say about Oxford's qualifications to have written Shakespeare.

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.

Flawed interpretations

Unfortunately, it also 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 Shakspeare 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, keep-

"The rest is silence"

Although in his book Alan Nelson never mentions the parallels in Shakespeare's works to Oxford's life, he uses a line from Shakespeare to conclude his chapter on Oxford's death.

"The rest was silence," he writes, and the words, of course, are a slight variation on the last words of Hamlet before he dies: "The rest is silence."

Oxfordians, who see the Earl of Oxford portraying much of himself in Prince Hamlet, have sometimes conjectured that Hamlet's final words expressed the dramatist's despair about the end of his creative but controversial life and about how posterity would judge him and his works. Nelson would not agree—at least not yet.

ing 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 his 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 Edward de Vere Studies Conference, directed by Professor Daniel Wright. And he says he will donate the royalties from the sale of the second 1,000-copies of his book to the conference.

A number of contemporary Oxfordian scholars and writers appear in the acknowledgments, 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 (Green maintains a website at: <http://www3.telus.net/oxford/>).

No authorship debate

Nelson sketches historical aspects of the authorship controversy in the Introduction but then mentions it briefly in passing only three times in the 85 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 Gyneth 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 men-

tion 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 J. Thomas Looney and Eva Turner Clark. Nelson does not mention it in his text.

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 him 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 Oxford from his escapades and financial difficulties. Oxfordians do not agree with that interpretation of the record.

More demonologer than biographer

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) biographer but, in his case, more demonologer 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, supposedly 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 bi-sexual 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.”

Unworthy of Shakespeare

Nelson deems this all 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 most artists and writers of genius. Indeed, it is their complex and sometimes outrageous personalities that are richly reflected in the works of great writers.

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. 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,” in the words of the great, orthodox scholar, S. 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